

NOW 16 ADDITIONAL PAGES!

15¢
MAY



10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

● **REBELLION IN
DEVIL'S CANYON**

by GUNNISON STEELE
TWO NOVELETTES

● **ONE AGAINST THE
TRIANGLE TRIGGERS**

by ART LAWSON

● **BOOTHILL'S
ELECTION DAY**

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

● GIPSON ● COBURN
● LEWIS ● SAXON
● CHADWICK
● FLOREN
● NEWTON



MEN! Sensational New NECKTIE GLOWS in the Dark!

By Day
A Wonderful
Necktie . . .



By Night
the most unique
effect you have
ever seen . .



Creates a Sensation Wherever you go . . .

It seems almost unbelievable, the magic beauty of an amazing new kind of stylish, wrinkleproof, high class necktie that actually glows in the dark! Glows with a strange luminous pattern of the patriot's universal fighting code . . . — "V!" It's called the new Victory Necktie, and what a sensation! Both men and women rave about its magnificent beauty, and the startling miracle of its glow in the dark, that makes it the most unusual, strikingly unique tie you've ever seen. Imagine its marvelous effect—its actual protection—in blackouts, or dimouts for its light can be seen at a distance. And now through this astounding but limited introductory offer you too, can secure some of these ties to wear yourself or give as treasured gifts.



YOU MUST SEE THIS MIRACLE YOURSELF!
Send no money . . . Mail coupon . . . Test at our risk.

Make no mistake, this new Victory Necktie must not be confused with any ordinary novelty tie, for by day you'll be vastly proud of its fine material, its smartness—a high class, distinctive tie in every way. Wrinkleproof! Ties up perfectly! It's rich dark blue and in a splendor of red and white, is the Victory Code that glows in the dark. You would expect this wonderful tie to be very expensive, but it won't cost you \$5.00 nor even \$2.00, for under this special limited offer, it is yours for only 98c. Nor is that all. You send no money. You merely pay postman 98c plus postage. Then examine. See how beautiful. And if you're not eager to wear it, if you are not fully satisfied in every way, all you need do is return it under the manufacturer's positive assurance of money refunded. That's fair isn't it? Don't wait. Send for your Victory Necktie that glows in the dark NOW.

MAIL THIS COUPON!

ONLY **98¢**

Everywhere you go, by day or night, your Victory Necktie (also called Blackout) will attract attention, envy, and admiration. Imagine its beauty by day—the fighting man's . . . "V" for Victory, in striking red, and white on rich dark blue background! And at night the Victory Code in flaming beauty! Wear this tie with pride—it's smart, wrinkleproof—and holds its shape perfectly. A superb bargain in quality, with the added sensational magic of glowing in the dark. Send for yours now!

GLOW IN THE DARK NECKTIE CO.
207 N. MICHIGAN AVE., DEPT. 801
CHICAGO 1, ILLINOIS

Rush me my Victory Necktie that glows in the dark. I will pay postman 98c plus postage with your positive assurance I will be delighted or return tie for full refund.

If you want us to send you 3 Glowing Neckties for \$2.79 check here ☐

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY STATE

YES, Mr. (or Miss) Bookkeeper, you can become an accountant and make real money.

And you don't need to take the long drudgery way of learning on the job—day by day—a little now and a little then.

Instead you can take a shorter cut to accountancy success—a shorter cut that will give you accountancy training and fit you for more money and a better job in a comparatively short time.

The demand for accountants is great. You need only scan the "Help Wanted" columns to prove this for yourself. And while the demand is increasing, the shortage of capable accountants is becoming more acute.

Taxes—Social Security, the Withholding Tax, Victory Tax—changes in plant structure, the many and varied reports heads of business must have to know the status of their companies quickly and accurately, the many and varied reports which have to be made to government, rapid turnover of labor—

All these and many more factors make the demand for competent accountants far exceed the supply—and promotion comes fast to the able man who knows the whys and wherefores of accountancy.

Under the LaSalle Problem Method you can acquire a thorough knowledge of Accountancy—you can master its fundamental principles and become expert in the application of those principles. You learn by doing—and without losing any time from your present work.

You train directly under the supervision of a competent staff of Certified Public Accountants—and you can train as quickly or as slowly as you choose.

Our 48-page booklet, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," is FREE. It explains how we train you from the ground up—or from where you are now—according to your needs. The cost is low—terms easy.

Send the coupon now. Don't lay it aside and say you'll send it later. It can be the means of your success—perhaps more money and a better job than you ever dreamed. At least it's worth investigating. So send it now.



**"I'm *TIRED* of being
just a Bookkeeper**

***I'm going to be an Accountant
—and make REAL money"***

LASALLE
EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution

Dept. 5334-H

Chicago 15, Ill.

I'd like to prepare for a good accounting job. Send me your free booklet and full details about your training.

Name _____ Age _____

Position _____

Address _____

City and State _____

10 FICTION BULL'S EYES IN EVERY ISSUE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NOW 16
ADDITIONAL
PAGES!

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
MAY 10th

VOLUME XXIV

MAY, 1944

NUMBER 2

1—Complete Novel—1

- REBELLION IN DEVIL'S CANYON**.....Gunnison Steele 8
In the forbidden valley of the Dark Cralle clan Reef Ballock sought to unravel the hangrope that snaked up his back trail.

2—Feature Novelettes—2

- ONE AGAINST THE TRIANGLE TRIGGERS**.....Art Lawson 52
Jeff didn't mind dying . . . once. But a man could die many times, looking into Sally's eyes—and knowing she was a syndicate spy!
- BOOTHILL'S ELECTION DAY**.....Tom W. Blackburn 92
"Christian Defever for Mayor!" It was a great battle cry—but Chris was destined never to shout it.

7—Short Stories—7

- TEXICAN, TIE DOWN YOUR SCALP!**.....Fred Gipson 28
Me and Big Foot Wallace have a dark confession to make. . .
- PAYOFF AT POVERTY FLAT**.....Walt Coburn 36
At last year's rodeo, the old gang were right friendly. This year they all packed six-irons!
- GUN GHOSTS CAN'T DIE!**.....Lee Floren 44
Jim Lincoln was too much of a man to look back—but not man enough to face the future!
- THE OUTCAST OF CLIFF CITY**.....John A. Saxon 67
The payroll looked mighty tempting to a man who had been law-hounded out of every honest job he got!
- TOWN OF SUDDEN DEATH**.....Morgan Lewis 74
Though a girl deliberately crippled his gun-hand, Marshal Sanderson had to face the ace gunslinger of the untamed Southwest.
- JOHNNY'S BULLET BONANZA**.....Joseph Chadwick 79
His days of life already numbered, young Johnny Chance raced Death—to wipe the stain of the owlhoot from his name.
- POWDERSMOKE WISDOM**.....D. B. Newton 88
Fugitive Sam Boland wanted to go straight—but his only path crossed the trail of three notch-hungry killers!
- Western Features
- A MAN MUST FIGHT!**.....The Editor 6
Ride with Jack Boyden to the blizzard range where coffins were free!
- COVER—"Big Foot Figured the Injuns Would be Ripe for a Peace Talk. . ."**
From Texican, Tie Down Your Scalp!

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published monthly by Popular Publications, 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter Sept. 24, 1941, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.80. Foreign postage 75c additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

LIGHTER MOMENTS with **fresh Eveready Batteries**



"Tell the Mess Sergeant to look up the recipe for turtle soup."

POWERFUL little "Eveready" "Mini-Max" batteries make the armed forces 2-way radios practicable. The reason your dealer has none on his shelves today is that our entire production is now going to the armed forces.

You, personally, can save a soldier's life by giving a pint of blood to the Red Cross. They maintain Blood Donor Centers in 35 cities. Call for an appointment now!

The words "Eveready" and "Mini-Max" are registered trade-marks of National Carbon Company, Inc.



A Man Must Fight!

BATTLING a blizzard, freezing to death, Jack Boyden struggled up to the lighted window of one of the bunkhouses of the vast Muleshoe spread. With hard luck riding close herd on him ever since he could remember, Jack didn't know—or care much—what sort of a welcome would be waiting at the Muleshoe.

The warmth of that welcome surprised him. And the next day when Jack had thawed out and slept himself out, he opened his eyes to see an old-timer, sitting beside the bunk.

Jack grinned at the old-timer.

The oldster said, "Picked you up last night, tappin' on the window like a crow. Fetched in your hoss, too. Was just down to the stable. Yore ole crowbait's doin' fine."

"Thanks, friend." Jack put out his hand. "Name of Boyden. Jack Boyden."

"Hank O'Keefe," the oldster said.

"Glad to know you."

"Likewise."

Jack swung his legs from under the blanket. Barefooted he tried a step. He marveled that he could walk, after the savage mauling the blizzard had given him. He flexed his arms. He was grinning with pleasure when someone knocked on the door. When Hank yelled, "Come in," the door opened.

Jack's eyes dilated. He was immediately embarrassed at being barefooted, at having the tails of his shirt out, at needing a shave. Their visitor was a girl. Her cheeks were red from the cold. Her lips were crimson and her nose pink. But her eyes were black when she laughed.

"What the matter with him, Hank," she asked. "He freeze in that position last night?"

Jack dropped his arms. Color burned his face. "Mornin', Miss," he said.

"I'm Nell Bishop." She went directly to the point. "I own the Muleshoe. What're you doing in this country?"

Jack had never met anyone like her. The barkeep back in Beehive City had not told him about Nell Bishop.

"The barkeep in Beehive said you'd have a job for me," he said.

The girl looked him over much as she

might have examined a steer she was thinking of buying. She saw that he was six feet of whalebone and rawhide. His eyes were blue, the corners crinkled from looking off over endless plains. His hands were rope burned and the seat of his pants had been shined by his saddle.

"Can you peel the rough string?" she asked.

"I can ride anything," said Jack.

The girl laughed good naturedly. "We'll see, cowboy." She put out a hand and he shook with her. "Show him around, Hank," she said to the oldster, then wheeled away. . . .

Hank did show Jack around, and they reached the cook-shack just as the cook was banging his triangle. . . .

In the cook-shack Hank took Jack over to the ramrod and started to introduce.

"Slim—this is the new peeler—"

The man named Slim got up. He held a hand for Jack Boyden. Slim's lips twitched and he withdrew his hand before Jack had raised his. Slim had become as pale as the drifts outside.

Jack stared at him. Long ago he had sworn to kill Slim Lederle on sight—and here he was.

"Evenin'—Slim—" Jack said— "or did you change your name when you got down here?"

"I didn't change my name," Slim said. Slim edged him down the cook-shack away from the other men. Lips tight across shining teeth he asked: "You came looking for me?"

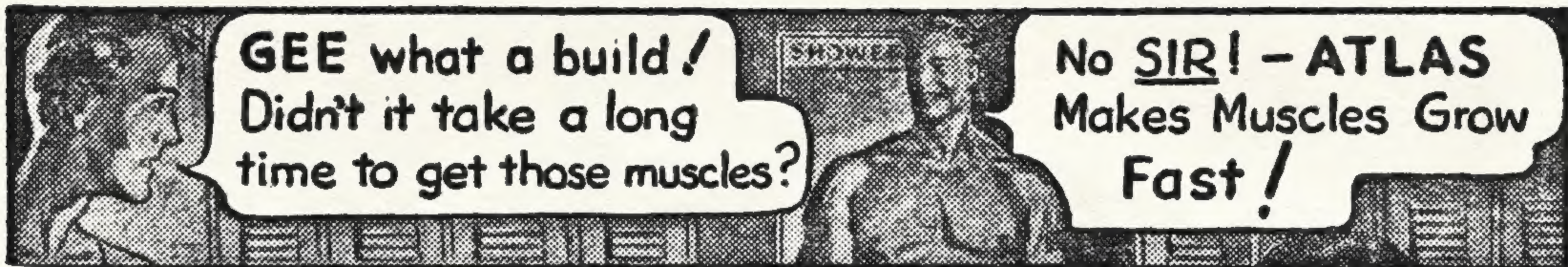
"Not exactly." Jack shook his head. "But now that we're both here, Slim, what are you going to do about—"

"This!" Slim Lederle said.

He lifted a fist from the floor. It was a treacherous move. It caught Jack absolutely flat-footed. . . .

This bitter feud that had now changed the friendliness of the Muleshoe into a nest of hatred for Jack will be dramatically told by the well-known Art Lawson in the next issue in his stirring cow-country novel—"Coffins Free!"—along with other novellettes and short stories. June 10 STORY WESTERN—published May 10th!

The Editor.



Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

5 inches of new Muscle "My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8".—G. S., W. Va.	What a difference! "I have put 3 1/2" on chest (normal and 2 1/2" expanded).—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME! John Jacobs BEFORE John Jacobs AFTER	For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS "Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J. GAINED 29 POUNDS "When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE and OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"**Dynamic Tension!**" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool

with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through "**Dynamic Tension**" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid **MUSCLE**.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "**Dynamic Tension**" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to **BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY**.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became **NEW MEN** in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped **THEM** do. See what I can do for **YOU!** For a real thrill, send for this book today, **AT ONCE**. **CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 83E, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83E, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "**Dynamic Tension**" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "**Everlasting Health and Strength**."

Name
(Please print or write plainly)

Address

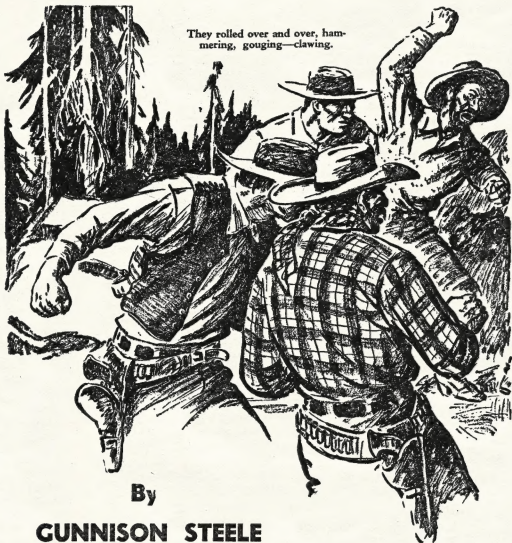
City State.....



REBELLION IN

Smashing Action Novel

They rolled over and over, hammering, gouging—clawing.



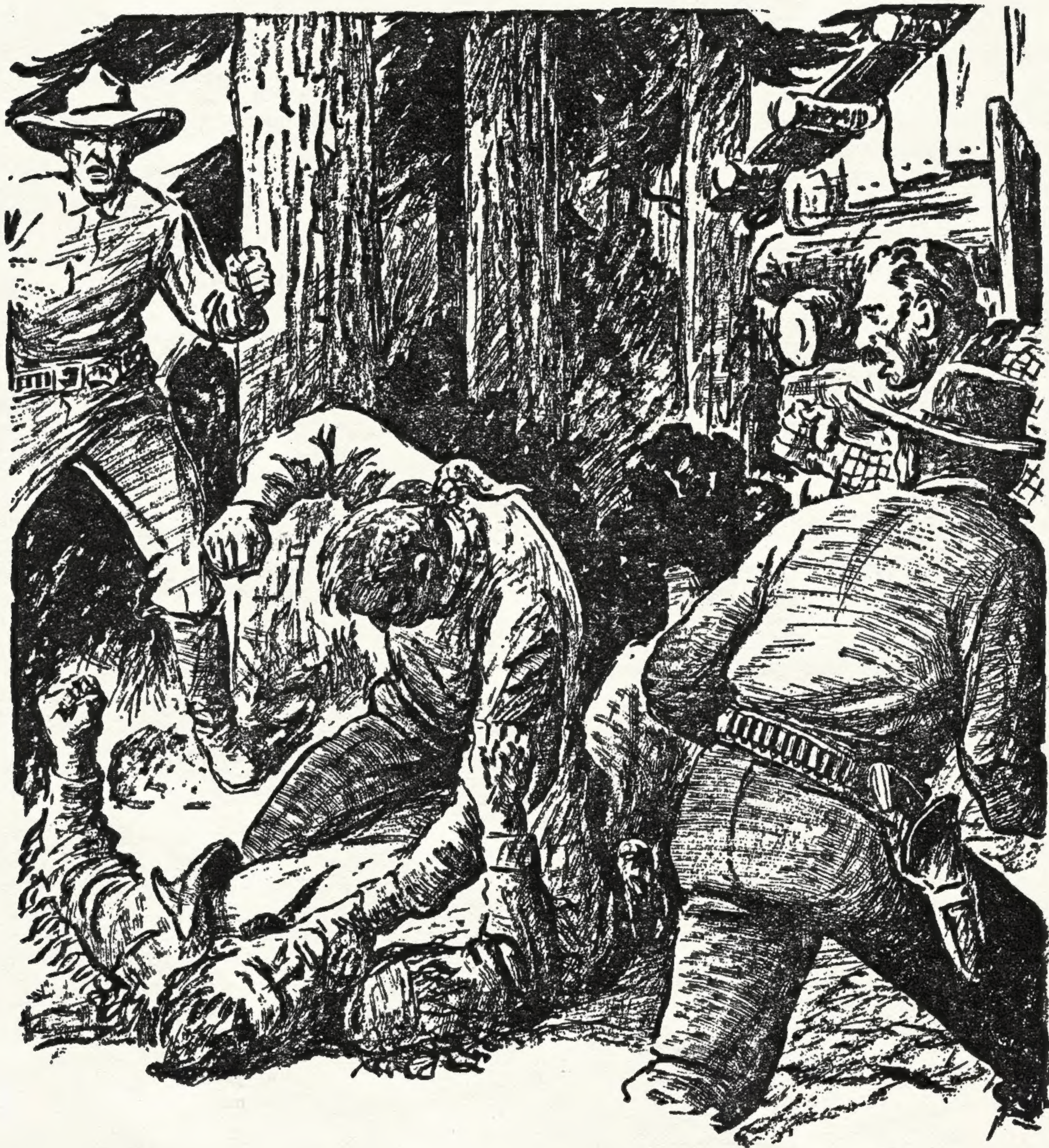
By

GUNNISON STEELE

To the forbidden land of the Dark Cralle clan rode desert-wolf Reef Ballock, seeking to unravel the hangrope that snaked up his back trail.

DEVIL'S CANYON

of the Untamed West



CHAPTER ONE

Dark Young Giant

REEF BALLOCK, the harsh imprint of a long and hard back trail plain upon him, paused before entering the saloon and laid his careful glance along

Saddle Bow's rutted street. He was a big, powerful man with reddish hair and angular, high-cheeked features. He had the suspicious, wary look of a desert wolf about him.

Saddle Bow had nothing to set it apart from the scores of other cowtowns he'd seen along that back trail. Yet, inside Reef

Ballock was the driving conviction that here in this massive sweep of Wyoming high country he would find Sam Kurf—the one man who could help him. The conviction was a refrain running fierce and triumphant through him.

His alert eyes paused on a man slouched in a rocker on the shady porch of a building half a block along the street. That man was Sheriff John Tiger, rawboned, with sweeping gray mustaches and shaggy, roan-gray hair. Tiger wasn't dozing, as he appeared to be—he was watching Ballock.

Two riders came along the street, the hoofs of their horses stirring up yellow whorls of dust. Ballock glanced casually at them—and then his gaze riveted on them with a fixed interest. One of the riders was a girl—a slender girl, yellow-haired, olive-skinned . . . her beauty a vital, flaming thing.

Her companion was mounted on a cream gelding whose ornate trappings jangled and gleamed in the bright sun. He was bigger even than Reef Ballock, and younger. He wore fringed buckskins and flat-crowned hat. His dark, hawklike face was stamped with the arrogant knowledge of his handsomeness and power, and his bold black eyes were lofty with contempt for all lesser men.

The girl looked toward Ballock. Her cool gaze touched him, moved past then returned and lingered with quick interest. She smiled, a quick smile quickly gone.

Ballock touched his hat.

The dark young giant frowned, seemed about to speak then shrugged and laughed silently. They moved on past. Ballock saw the girl speak to the sheriff; saw him straighten and lift his hat with a quick, gallant gesture.

Ballock continued watching as the two dismounted at a livery stable down the street. The dark rider led the mounts inside, while the girl crossed the street to a general merchandise store. She paused, glancing briefly along the street toward Ballock then went inside. Ballock turned and entered the saloon. He ordered his drink and sipped it slowly.

The bartender, a skinny, horse-faced man, studied him with furtive interest. "Just got into town?"

"Last night," Ballock said briefly.

"Come far?"

"Far enough."

The barkeep tried again: "You see them two that just rode into town?"

Ballock showed his interest then. "Who are they?"

"You're a stranger here, like I figured. They're Dark Ben Cralle and his cousin Sherry. Dark Ben's tough. He rides down about twice a year, gets mean drunk and then there's hell to pay."

"Down from where?" Ballock asked.

"Dark Valley. A hard bunch up there, and Dark Ben's the hardest. Last time, he busted up my place. John Tiger can handle him, though."

A customer came up, and the barkeep moved away.

Ballock finished his drink and looked interestedly about the room. A poker game was going at a table near the back of the room. He strolled over, stood watching for a moment, then asked:

"Mind if I take a hand?"

A player said briefly, "Your money's good as any, mister."

Ballock played for a couple of hours, winning a little—but the game held slight interest for him.

Finally, a puncher came in and said, "That Dark Ben is on the prowl up at Tebe Jacks' place. He threwed Tebe through a window and took over, sellin' some of Tebe's likker and drinkin' more. Reckon he'll be headin' this way before long."

One of the players got up. "I'm cashin' in. I got no insurance." He left the saloon.

The others quit, too.

Ballock crammed his winnings into his pocket, went to the bar and had another drink. Then he went between the batwings—and as he did so he almost collided with the yellow-haired girl. She was carrying an armful of packages, and, as she stepped aside, she dropped one of them into the dust.

Quickly, hat in hand, Ballock retrieved it. She was, he saw, even more beautiful than he'd first thought. He said, "That was clumsy of me."

SHE measured him with calm, blue eyes, and smiled. "It was really no fault of yours. I don't remember ever seeing you before." It was a question.

"Because you never saw me," he said.

"I'm just a rolling stone, looking for a place to stop and gather some moss."

"You don't look like a saddle bum."

"Neither does a buzzard look ugly—when he's sailin' high above in the air."

She laughed, a low, throaty sound. "That serves me right, for asking questions that are none of my business." She inclined her head slightly, still smiling, and passed on along the street.

Ballock watched her for ten seconds, then turned and went in the opposite direction, toward the hotel where he had a room.

Sheriff John Tiger sat motionless in his rocker on the porch of his office across the street, seemingly undisturbed by the ruckus in Tebe Jack's saloon.

Suddenly the batwing doors of that saloon banged open and a man came out onto the boardwalk. It was, Ballock saw, the buckskin-clad Dark Ben Cralle. Dark Ben started along the walk toward Ballock. He walked slowly, massive shoulders hunched forward, legs a little spraddled and his feet smacking solidly on the walk. Dark Ben seemed drunk, but not making a crooked step.

As they approached each other, Ballock inched to his side of the walk to let the buckskin giant pass. But he saw instantly that Dark Ben didn't want it that way. Dark Ben stopped, legs spread wide, hands on his lips, making passage for Ballock impossible. Ballock stopped, smiling a little but refusing to step into the dust.

Dark Ben frowned, arrogance and contempt in his black eyes. The giant, Ballock saw then, wasn't so drunk as he'd first appeared.

Dark Ben said, "You take up a lot of sidewalk, my friend."

"My part," Ballock answered calmly.

"What makes you think you've got a part? I don't get dust on my boots for any of you low-country saddle bums. Step aside!"

Ballock said dryly, "My part. There's room for both."

Dark Ben squared his shoulders. "I hoped you'd see it like that. Because there's somethin' else. I saw you speak to the girl just now. I didn't like that."

"Your private property?"

"Maybe she is. But we'll let that slide. Point is, I don't like the way your hair's

cut. And you're standin' on a spot where I want to walk."

Ballock saw the eager, wicked light in Dark Ben's eyes—the dark giant was a man hunting trouble and wanting it. From the corner of his eyes Ballock saw Sheriff John Tiger get up from his chair, step down into the street and come toward them. He saw that the girl had turned and was watching them.

"Friend," Ballock said with studied insolence, "if you crave to walk on this spot of sidewalk I'm coverin', you'll have to push me off it—or go over me."

"I'll go over you, and tromp you while I'm doin' it!"

Dark Ben drove his huge body forward suddenly, the point of his shoulder aimed at Ballock's chest, intending to smash Ballock backward into the dusty street. Ballock braced himself, half turned, dropping his own shoulder so that it smacked solidly into the giant's side. The impact popped like a pistol shot. It stopped Dark Ben cold, shoved him backward, jarring him.

Surprise showed on Dark Ben's face, then rage. He lunged forward, smashing at Ballock's face with a huge fist. Ballock ducked under the blow and slammed his own fist into the giant's stomach. Dark Ben grunted and jack-knifed. Ballock slashed his other fist into Dark Ben's face. Dark Ben reeled back.

"Friend," Ballock said jeeringly, "you're drunk. Go sober up and we'll have some fun!"

He drove suddenly forward, hammering the point of his shoulder against Dark Ben's chest. Dark Ben staggered violently, caught a bootheel against the edge of the sidewalk and sprawled ungracefully backward. A geyser of dust spurted upward as he smacked solidly into the street.

Dark Ben realized suddenly that he'd suffered the indignity he'd intended to inflict upon Reef Ballock. He surged upward, his inky eyes filled with a blazing fury that was wholly wicked and deadly, and a hand was tugging at his belted gun.

But Sheriff John Tiger had run up by now. He yelled, "All right—all right!" and jumped in between Dark Ben and Ballock. Facing Dark Ben, he held a long-barreled gun in his hand.

It had its immediate effect upon Dark Ben. He checked his headlong surge, com-

ing back on his heels, and stood with gun half drawn. His dark face almost satanic, he said, "Don't interfere, John Tiger! Can't no saddle-drifter put me into the dust—and live. Stand aside!"

"I give the orders here, Dark Ben," the old sheriff said. "You know that. If you want to dispute it, you can. Otherwise, take in your horns."

BALLOCK stood quietly, missing nothing, knowing that in another second either he or Dark Ben Cralle would have died. Dark Ben wasn't just drunk; whiskey had only driven the evil inside him to the surface. He was dangerous and violent and deadly. But the enormous respect he had for the tall, old sheriff was plain. He wasn't cowed or afraid—but he let the gun drop back into its holster.

The girl had come up. Her face showed no excitement, no partiality, as she looked from Ballock to Dark Ben. She said, "I'm through shopping, Ben. I'm ready to go."

"All right," the sheriff said. "Go on, Dark Ben—get out of town and sober up. And just a word of advice. It's gettin' a little thin, you gettin' likkered up and bustin' up a place or two ever' time you come to town. Come when you feel like it—but walk straight from now on. All right, now, go on."

Dark Ben squared his massive shoulders.

Sherry Cralle had turned and was walking along the street. "Coming, Ben?"

Dark Ben shrugged, looked at Ballock. "Another time, maybe?"

Ballock said, "Any time—just any time."

Dark Ben strode after the girl. They went to the livery where they'd left their horses.

Sheriff John Tiger holstered his gun, saying to Ballock, "I'd like a word with you." He turned and crossed to his office.

Ballock followed him inside and sat down in a chair that the lawman nudged forward with his foot. He had a new respect for this gnarled old man. Tiger was tough, unbending. Dark Ben could have broken him with his hands, or drawn his gun and maybe killed him. But Ben hadn't done it, because he knew that the sheriff, once a decision was made, would die before retreating from it.

John Tiger said, "I been watchin' you since you hit town."

"So I've noticed."

"What's your name?"

"Reef Ballock. I'm a drifter, just ridin' through, but if I like it I might stay."

"You're no saddle bum. You're here for some purpose, likely lookin' for some man. Who is it?"

"My business," Ballock said.

"That's right," agreed the lawman. "My business starts when I clear away enough of the dust from your back trail to find out just who and what you are. And I'll say this—you've just stirred up a whole passel of rattlers."

"Dark Ben, you mean?"

"Dark Ben." He looked shrewdly at Ballock. "Saddle Bow is the end of the trail. When you get here you either stay, turn around and go back where you came—or ride on to Dark Valley."

Ballock grunted. "Where is this Dark Valley?"

"To hell-and-gone up in the hills. A queer sort of place, hemmed by peaks. A long time ago two Cralles, Beaver and Missouri, found the valley and settled there with their families. The Cralle clan has been there ever since, livin' and dyin' there, hardly ever comin' outside and not wantin' strangers in there. They make and enforce their own laws, and they do a pretty good job of it. Usually, I stay away and leave them alone."

"How big is this valley?"

"Thirty miles long, mebby half as wide. Roaring River marks its entrance, flows its length and goes out through a canyon at the lower end. [Just inside the valley the river widens into Blue Lake. At the head of the lake is Gateway, only town in the valley. . . . Seem mighty interested in Dark Valley, Ballock.]

"I am. Dark Ben and the girl—Sherry—they don't look much alike."

"They're not. And that's another story. Sometime after settlin' in the valley, Beaver and Missouri Cralle had a fight. By then their kids had kids of their own. So they split up, and they've stayed split—the Dark Cralles and the Blue Lake Cralles. The Blue Lake Cralles live along the lake and on the grasslands, while the Dark Cralles live in the hills and forests. Not exactly enemies, they ain't, but they just naturally don't trust each other. Sometimes when they get likkered up they get into a ruckus.

But they settle all of their own fights."

Ballock murmured, "Sherry is a Blue Lake Cralle, Ben a Dark Cralle. The Dark Cralles skulk in the hills and woods, hating the Blue Lake Cralles because they've just naturally got more brains, pestering them and maybe stealing from them."

John Tiger looked keenly at Ballock. "For a stranger, you know a lot. Dark Ben is wild and tough, but I never heard him accused of bein' a thief. Since Sherry's daddy, Iron Mike Cralle, was killed a few years back, Dark Ben has kind of taken over leadership of the clan."

"Who killed Iron Mike?"

"Why, I never found out. They're a close-mouthed lot up there. They quarrel among themselves, but let a 'furriner' come in and they all turn on him." Tiger shifted in his chair, went on: "Not all of them accept Dark Ben as their leader. A lot of them would rather follow Sherry Cralle." The old lawman frowned thoughtfully. "I hear they been havin' some trouble up there lately."

"What kind of trouble?"

Tiger said dryly, "I brought you in here to ask you some questions, but you've done most of the askin'. I've found out one thing, though—you're headed for Dark Valley."

"I never aimed to keep it a secret." Ballock got to his feet and walked to the door. There he paused briefly. "Sheriff, do you know a man named Sam Kurf?"

Long John shook his head. "Never heard of him. But I'll give you some advice: Stay away from Dark Valley. You'll get yourself killed."

"A chance I have to take," Ballock said, and went out.

CHAPTER TWO

Code of the Clan

THE base of two jagged peaks formed a half-mile wide funnel. A stream, narrow but swift and turbulent, followed the tortuous course of the funnel for several miles. Riding without any effort at secrecy through the funnel—after following dim trails through wild, forbidding country—Ballock emerged suddenly into the valley. The settlement of Gateway lay before him.

Gateway was a tiny place, consisting mainly of frame buildings strung sparsely along both sides of a red-sand street. It huddled at the head of a lake that was startlingly blue and clear in the sunshine. Dark pines and firs towered above it.

Ballock stopped his big black and dismounted at a rack before a saloon. Half a dozen other horses stood at tie-bars. Among them he saw Dark Ben Cralle's cream gelding, its ornate trappings gleaming in the late afternoon sun. Dark Ben himself was nowhere in sight.

Ballock went into the saloon. A rough pine bar was at one end of the big room. Several gaunt, sun-blackened men were in the place, grouped about a poker table. They looked at him with distrust and suspicion plain in their eyes.

He went to the bar and said, "Whiskey."

The buck-toothed bartender set out a glass and a stone jug. Ballock poured and drank, almost strangling as the vile stuff made a fiery path into his stomach. He asked, "Know where a man can get a meal and bed?"

"Hotel," grunted the barkeep. "You aim to stay long?"

"Depends."

"You know anybody here?"

"I know Dark Ben Cralle. And I know his cousin, Miss Sherry."

"You a friend of Dark Ben's, or Sherry's?"

Ballock looked at the men about the table. They sat very still, listening, watching him, waiting for him to state his business. He shrugged, said, "I only said I knew them."

He looked out a window. A big, red-haired man had approached his black. The man circled the black, studying its brand. Then he stepped closer, probing a saddlebag with his fingers.

Ballock set his glass on the bar, turned and walked slowly from the saloon. He went over to the horse. He said casually: "Friend, that's my horse. Get away from it."

Red turned and looked at him—showing no embarrassment, only open insolence. His hand was still on the saddlebag. "Touchy about your crowbar, ain't you?"

"That's right. Step away!"

The burly redhead didn't move. "We don't like furriners here. When one shows

up, we like to know who he is and what his business is. That's why I'm tryin' to find out."

Ballock's eyes shone with a quick and wicked temper. He knew he was being watched from buildings all over the settlement. He would be judged by what he did.

He said thinly, "Step away. I won't tell you again."

Instead of obeying, Red lifted the flap of the saddlebag and thrust a big hand inside.

Ballock leaped at him. He clamped his left arm about Red's thick neck, jerked him backward and then smashed his other fist hard into Red's coarse face. He hit Red twice more, before releasing him.

Pain and dazed surprise were on Red's face. He stumbled and went to his knees, swaying there a moment and looking up at Ballock as if unable to understand what had happened. Then, suddenly, he came up and at Ballock. Red was a big, powerful man and cougarishly quick. He rushed Ballock, cursing, and drove a massive fist at his head.

Ballock ducked under the blow. He came up, catching Red off balance, and drove his fist deep into Red's belly. The breath went out of Red noisily. He jack-knifed, his heavy face contorted, backing away. Ballock waited, knowing that a score of men, including Dark Ben Cralle, had come from buildings and were gathering about them.

Red had recovered his breath. But he was wary now. He circled Ballock, his boots digging into the red sand. Then he lunged in suddenly, bent low. Instead of trying to avoid him, Ballock stood solid, smashing at his head. The blow rocked Red, but he came doggedly in. He flung his thick arms about Ballock's waist and clamped down hard—then he brought his head up savagely under Ballock's chin.

Ballock's brain reeled—fierce pain slashed at him and he tasted blood in his mouth. He leaned into Red, trying to hold on until his head cleared. But Red tripped him and pulled him down to the ground. Red thought he had him now, and he went to work like a bulldog. He clawed and kicked, fought like a vicious animal.

But Ballock's head was clearing now. He heard men yelling. He heard somebody he thought was Dark Ben, say calmly:

"Bust him up, Red—make him eat sand!"

ON THE trails he had traveled during the last two years, Reef Ballock had learned all there was to know about rough-and-tumble fighting. He was as powerful as Red. And when he saw that Red wanted it rough and dirty—he went to work!

Pretty soon Ballock got up, leaving Red writhing and moaning and gasping for breath there on the ground. Ballock's anger was still wicked and sharp. He looked about the circle of suddenly-quiet men and said, "Anybody else curious?" His gaze paused flatly on Dark Ben Cralle.

Dark Ben wasn't drunk now. He faced Ballock. "You play rough, friend."

"Rough enough. You already knew that, I think."

Dark Ben laughed. "What happened in Saddle Bow, you mean? Don't let yourself get feeling too good about that. The important thing now—is that I had you figured right. I figured you'd come up here. Question is, why?"

"My business," Ballock said. He picked up his hat from the dust, brushed red dirt from his clothes. "No law against it, is there?"

"Maybe there is. And my advice to you is to get on your horse and make tracks."

Ballock said thinly, "And my advice to you is to walk on your own side of the road."

The buckskin giant flushed darkly. "My part of the road is this whole valley. I walk all over it, and I tell others where to walk. I'll tell you too!"

"Any time," Ballock said softly. "Just any time."

Dark Ben hunched his enormous shoulders. Violence flashed in his black eyes. Those nearest him stepped backward out of his way, their eyes alight with anticipation.

Red had staggered to his feet, and he mumbled through smashed lips, "Break 'im in two, Ben. Kill him—or I will!"

Ballock stood on wide-spread legs, waiting.

Dark Ben moved forward. "You hunt trouble like a dog hunts a bone, friend. All right, I'll—"

Sherry Cralle pushed her way through the circle of men. "I don't think you'd better, Ben."

She wore levis and shirt and boots, and

a beaded buckskin jacket. Again, the impact of her vital, fiery beauty was almost like a blow against Reef Ballock.

Dark Ben said angrily, "This is no affair of yours, Sherry. This Bucko had his way down in John Tiger's town—but he can't do it here. Stand out of the way!"

"I think not, Ben," she said. "What has he done?"

"He beat Red up—"

"Red had it coming. I saw what happened from the store over there. Red was meddling. I know you told him to do it but that doesn't change it."

"Don't it?" Dark Ben's black eyes narrowed down speculatively on the girl. "Since Iron Mike died, I'm runnin' this valley, Sherry."

Still calm, she said, "Since he was murdered, you mean. And whether or not you're running this valley—is a matter of opinion. If you are, you're doing a bad job of it. If you are, why don't you stop all the thieving and killing that's going on?"

Dark Ben shrugged. "I'll stop it, all right. But that's gettin' away from the subject. What about this jigger?"

"Well, what about him?"

Ballock hadn't moved or spoken but he'd missed nothing. This clash of wills between the girl and Dark Ben had almost the impact of a physical battle. Dark Ben could have broken her in two with one hand—he was furiously angry with her—yet there was respect and uncertainty in his eyes as he faced her.

Ballock knew that with a word he could push the girl aside and have his showdown with Dark Ben. But he didn't want that now. So he remained silent, watching, puzzled by Sherry Cralle's intervention in his behalf.

Dark Ben said, "We don't know who this jigger is or what he wants here. He may even be a U. S. marshal."

"What of it? We don't have anything to hide—or shouldn't have."

"That's not the kind of song I've heard you sing before," the dark giant sneered. "Anyway, you know the law: No stranger can come into the valley and stay, unless somebody knows him and will vouch for him."

"I know the law," Sherry said calmly.

**I put the hex on scrubby shaves
With Thin Gillette, the blade that saves!
In record time my face feels swell
And looks right in the pink as well!**



**Precision-made to fit your
Gillette Razor exactly**



4 for 10¢

Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

"And I know him. I'll vouch for him. Is that sufficient?"

A surprised murmur rose among the grouped men. Sherry's words had their effect on Dark Ben Cralle. He showed his surprise, and then his bold, handsome face showed nothing at all, but something cold and wicked lay half hidden in his hooded eyes.

"All right, Sherry," he said. "I hope you don't regret it."

"If I do, it will be my regret," said the girl quietly.

Dark Ben turned abruptly and strode away. The others drifted away too. Ballock turned and looked at the girl. She returned his gaze, unsmiling, head a little on one side.

She murmured, "Men are a lot like dogs when they fight, aren't they?"

He laughed. "Only when they fight?"

"Yes—or when they want something somebody else has, which leads to a fight. With a dog, it's a bone, or a scrap of food; with a man it's money—or a woman."

"In this case it was a horse," he pointed out.

"Something else is behind it."

They walked slowly along the street. Ballock said, "Anyway, thanks. Why did you do it?"

"Maybe I didn't want to see Dark Ben beat you up."

"Do you think he would have?"

"I'm not sure. Don't you know that one of you would have died—that other time in Saddle Bow—if Long John hadn't interfered?"

He laughed softly. "I know that. And you still haven't explained why you did it?"

"And I won't. Will you be staying here awhile?"

"Yes."

"Men don't just come to Dark Valley. They have a reason, or they stay away. Why are you here?"

He smiled slowly. "I saw you on Saddle Bow's street."

A frown drew her fine brows together. "That's not the reason. You're looking for somebody. What makes you think you'll find him here?"

Bluntly, he asked, "Do you know a man named Sam Kurf?"

Sherry shook her head readily. "Nobody by that name lives in Dark Valley. Some-

times, though, when valley men go outside, they change their names." A sudden smile lighted her eyes. "I talk too much. I suppose you'll be wanting a place to sleep and eat?"

When he nodded, she pointed to a two-story frame building before which they had stopped. A faded sign across its front said: *Piedmont House*.

Sherry said, "Gateway's one hotel. I think you'll find the accommodations—adequate." She started to walk on, then hesitated. "You're tough, mister, I've seen that. But you'd better be careful."

"Of what?"

"Dark Ben. The fact that I vouched for you doesn't mean you'll be safe. Dark Ben is tough, too. Watch out for him." She moved on along the street, walking with a smooth liteness—a beautiful girl aware of her beauty and vital youth.

Ballock watched her until she entered a store, then returned to his horse and led it toward the livery. He was tired and dusty, but satisfied that he was on the right trail at last. He wanted Sam Kurf badly, and he wanted him alive—for only in that way could he lift from his own neck the threat of a hangrope.

CHAPTER THREE

Rope Shadow

A GOOD part of Dark Valley west of the lake and river was fertile grassland, although along the river in the northern end forests lay lush and green. This, for the most part, was the domain of the Blue Lake Cralles and it was dotted with small ranches that grazed sparse herds of sleek cattle.

East of lake and river, and in the extreme northern end of the valley, lived the Dark Cralles. Their ranches lay among the forests and narrow meadows. Many of them were trappers, some made a vicious brand of whiskey which they sold both in the valley and in the mining town of Snake Bar, which lay thirty miles below.

Dark Ben himself lived in a huge and ancient, log ranchhouse, deep in the dark hills. He ran a good many half-wild cattle in the woods and meadows, and he kept a big bunch of tough riders. By day and night they rode the forests along the lake

and river. Those who weren't in Dark Ben's favor gave these riders a wide berth.

In the beginning, old Missouri Cralle had settled on what was now the site of Gateway; later, however, he had moved two miles down the lake. Here, in a big white structure hemmed by towering pines, lived Sherry Cralle and her eighteen-year-old brother, Jo-Bob. Jo-Bob was a slender, handsome youngster with Sherry's yellow hair and blue eyes. . . .

Early the next morning Sherry roped her buckskin pony from the corral. As she was saddling the buckskin, Jo-Bob came over to her. Jo-Bob had been out late the night before, and he looked sleepy.

He asked, "What about this jigger Ballock?"

"Well, what about him?"

"You never tell me anything," the youngster complained. "I had to find out from somebody else what happened down in Saddle Bow. Now Jim Hand just told me about the beatin' this Ballock handed Red Fargo yesterday. What was it about?"

"A horse."

"A horse? Look, Sis—you don't have to be so close-mouthed, and you needn't act so innocent. I know you stood up for him. Was it to keep Dark Ben from messin' him up?"

She said coolly, "Dark Ben wouldn't have messed him up. Maybe it was to prevent a killing."

"And maybe," Jo-Bob grinned, "it was because you've taken a shine to him, huh?"

She grinned back. "Maybe. What'd you see last night?"

"A lot of trees and mountains, is all. And some of Dark Ben's tough hands prowlin' along the river. Tried to trail 'em, but they gave me the slip. By gosh, he must be a tush-hog!"

"Dark Ben, you mean?"

"No, this Reef Ballock. Where you goin' so early?"

She said, looking along the wagon road toward Gateway, "Just for a little ride."

Jo-Bob followed her gaze, watching the rider who was coming slowly along the road. He said, "That's got to be him, Ballock. Now, how'd you know he'd be ridin' this way?"

She grinned at him again. "You ask too many questions, little boy. And stop thinkin' what you're thinkin'!"

Ballock had seen them. He lifted his hand and turned his horse toward them. He stopped a few yards away and sat with hat in hand. He said, smiling, "You didn't tell me you lived here."

"Was I supposed to?" she asked.

Jo-Bob said critically, "Mister, you don't look so tough, but I guess you are. I'd like to have seen you bust Red."

Ballock grinned at him, liking him.

Sherry said, "This is my brother, Jo-Bob. He thinks he's a big boy now."

After talking briefly, Ballock gathered up his reins. "I'd started for a little ride. Goin' my way?"

Grinning, Jo-Bob said, "Yeah, she's goin' your way!"

Sherry looked frowningly at him, then she swung into the saddle and rode with Ballock along the lake shore. The lake was incredibly blue and sparkling in the early morning sun; its far edge, a mile away, seemed very close, with dark, mist-shrouded forests running down to the water. Beyond the forests, their crests alight with rainbow colors, the mountains rose abruptly.

They left the lake and rode across the grasslands. During the next few hours they stopped at several ranch-houses.

Everywhere the ranchers had heard of Ballock and his fight with Red Fargo. They spoke little, but Sherry's presence stamped him with their approval. Ballock saw, too, the worry and uncertainty that lay in the eyes of some of them.

Frankly, Sherry told him the reason:

"Night riders are stealing their cattle, and no honest man knows who the raiders are. They strike in the dark, steal only a few cattle at a time. But it's been going on for nearly two years. A lot of folks have lost nearly all the cattle they had."

"This valley is a pretty small place," Ballock pointed out.

"That's what makes it so queer. The cattle are driven into the badlands in the northern end of the valley, then—all signs vanish. There's no outlet there, except through the river canyon."

"Are the passes, at each end of the valley, the only outlets?"

"There are breaks in the peaks that a man might go through, afoot or horseback. But cattle couldn't be driven through."

"Doesn't anybody try to fight back?"

She looked at him. "Yes, some have fought back—and some have died. Ranches have been burned. Men, riding the forests and hills trying to catch the rustlers at work, have been killed from ambush. Jo-Bob swears he'll find who's behind it. I'm afraid they'll kill him, too. If only we knew *who's* doing it, the thing would be quickly settled."

He asked casually, "Has Dark Ben lost any cattle?"

SHE turned in the saddle and looked full at him. "Maybe we'd better have an understanding about Dark Ben. Whether or not I like him doesn't matter. I think I know him pretty well. Dark Ben thinks all other men are dirt compared to him. He would kill a man over a glass of whiskey, or a dog, if his temper flared. But I don't think he would steal. His own close kin, among the Dark Cralles, have lost just as heavily as the others. Dark Ben's own uncle was shot down when he tried to stop them from driving off a bunch of cattle. Does that answer your question?"

"Well enough."

"Besides, Dark Ben has saved a good many small outfits, on both sides, from being ruined."

"Taking mortgages against their outfits as security?"

"Why, yes—not because he asked it, but because their code wouldn't have let them accept the money otherwise. You dislike Dark Ben a great deal, don't you?"

"Not so much as he dislikes me."

She said earnestly, "Dark Ben *hates* you, Reef! You humiliated him in Saddle Row before the whole town, something no man has ever done before. If you stay here, one of you will be killed."

"I suppose so," he said indifferently.

She looked at him curiously. "You must want to find this Sam Kurf pretty badly."

"I do."

"Why?" asked Sherry.

Ballock said, "Because I'm supposed to have killed him. I was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to hang. But I broke jail and got away, knowing pretty well that I was framed. I think Sam Kurf is alive, and I've got to find him to prove I'm innocent."

"What makes you think he's here?"

"Because of something I heard down the trail."

"If he is, and you found him, it would be hard to get him out of the valley. If he's here, Jebbo would probably know. Jebbo knows everything about the valley."

"Jebbo?"

They had been riding along the lake shore near its lower end, and now Sherry stopped and pointed to a densely wooded island in the middle of the lake. The island was a quarter-mile long and less than half as wide. Sherry said:

"Jebbo is a very old man, and he's lived there on that island, alone, longer than I can remember. Nobody ever sees him leave the island, except when he comes down to Gateway for supplies—but, somehow, he knows everything that goes on in the valley."

"You think he might know about Sam Kurf?"

"Yes. And he's my friend. I once nursed him when he was very sick. If he does know, he might tell me. We'll visit him."

They dismounted and tied their horses to saplings. Ballock had already noticed the flat-bottomed boat tied to a stake. They untied it, got in. Ballock took the oars and shoved the craft away from the bank. The forested island drew slowly in toward them, and presently the bow grated on the gravelly shore.

He followed Sherry out onto the bank. He pulled the boat out of the water. Then he heard a sound that jerked him quickly about—the hard, quick pattering of many feet.

They stood on the edge of a clearing that extended back fifty yards from the shore. And now, bursting suddenly from the forest and racing headlong toward them across the clearing came a pack of dogs—huge, savage-looking beasts that ran swiftly, silently with fangs bared.

CHAPTER FOUR

"More Will Die!"

SHERRY stepped forward, called sharply, "Nero—Samson! Back!" A huge black dog, running with bared fangs ahead of the others, swerved suddenly. He led the pack in a half-circle about the two. Then the pack stopped, still silent except for the enormous black, which paced

back and forth before its followers and snarled at them warningly.

Ballock drew a deep breath, and took his hand from his gun.

Sherry said, "They keep watch for Jebbo, night and day. They are my friends."

"I wouldn't like to have them for enemies," said Ballock wryly.

They crossed the clearing and went along a dim pathway to emerge into a second clearing that held a log cabin. The place, closely hemmed by thickets, looked clean and orderly.

A man stood before the cabin, watching them. He was a gaunt, patriarchal figure, clad in homespun buckskins. He had a flowing, white beard. His silvery hair fell in orderly locks over his shoulders. His face was thin and unwrinkled. Piercing gray eyes were filled with peace and kindness and the wisdom of the very old. He spoke softly to his dogs, lifting his hand to bid Ballock and the girl approach.

His voice was gentle: "A long time since you visited with me, child. But I see you had not forgotten."

"I had not forgotten," Sherry said. "Uncle Jebbo, this is Reef Ballock. He is my friend."

"Your friend is my friend." He bade them sit in home-made chairs there in the cool shade of the cabin. He brought cool, sweet water from a nearby spring. And they talked for awhile.

Ballock marveled at the quiet wisdom, the calm peace, of Jebbo. Whatever his reason for shutting himself away here, alone, there was no bitterness in him, no loneliness, only serene contentment with the lake, the green forests, the dark cool mountains.

Sherry said quietly, "Uncle Jebbo, I came to ask a favor."

"For this man?" Jebbo looked at Ballock. "You are a stranger. You come here looking for someone. Who?"

"A man named Sam Kurf,"

"You are an officer of the law?" asked Jebbo.

"No. Sam Kurf helped do me a great wrong. It happened more than two years ago, in Arizona, where I owned a little ranch. The story is simple and old. A land-hog named Kinsella wanted my outfit because it had water that controlled a good part of his range. I wouldn't run, and he didn't dare kill me because he wasn't yet big enough to buck the law. So this Kinsella framed me.

"In the hills twenty miles from my place a man named Sam Kurf lived on a strip of land. It was common knowledge that Kinsella had filed on this land under Kurf's name. One night this Kurf's cabin was burned. In the ashes the law found the charred skeleton of a man, along with a watch, a ring and other things identified as belonging to Kurf. I was arrested, tried for the murder of Sam Kurf and convicted. Later, I broke jail and escaped."

"But what proof was there of your guilt?"

"It was proved beyond doubt that I was at Kurf's cabin the night it was burned. And I *had* been there. I didn't know Kurf, had never seen him in my life. But I'd heard reports of his capturing a wild stallion, named Tonto Red, that I'd been after for a long while. I'd gone up there to try to buy the stallion from him. But Kurf wasn't there. I waited till well after dark for him, then left. Later, at the trial, two of Kinsella's riders swore they'd looked through a window and saw me there. They swore that Kurf was there, too, and that we'd been quarreling bitterly. I couldn't prove different—so I was convicted.

"Later, after I escaped, I heard things that made me believe it wasn't really Sam Kurf who'd been in the cabin. The grave of a rancher, who'd died and been buried up in the hills a week before, had been opened and the body taken. This body must have been put into the cabin along with Kurf's

M. Howard Lane, who has had many thrill-packed stories in these pages, will be back next month with a Western action-mystery of a jail-branded cowpoke who desperately tried to forget his past—and his lightning trigger finger. Don't miss "Gun Waif of the Gold Storm." On sale May 10th!

watch and ring. Kurf had been paid to leave the country. I *knew* it had happened this way, but I couldn't prove it. So I set out to find Sam Kurf. If I can prove he is alive, I can prove my own innocence. For two years I've searched, picking up his trail, losing it—but growing more confident each day that Kurf is really alive."

"But if you had never seen this man?" asked Jebbo.

"I had a good description of him. A tall, skinny, hook-nosed man, partly bald. There's one way I'd know for certain. On the left side of his chest—a man who knew him told me this—Sam Kurf has a scar shaped like an X. I've traced that man, though not always known as Sam Kurf, to this valley."

After Ballock stopped speaking, Jebbo was quiet a long while, staring off toward the mountains. When he spoke, it was to Sherry Cralle:

"Tell your friend to go see Rufe Cralle. Rufe is a first cousin to Dark Ben, and a wicked man . . ."

EARLY morning mist still curled up from lake and river as Dark Ben and a dozen of his followers rode from the dripping forest into the clearing that held his gaunt old ranch buildings. The riders were sleepy-eyed and ill-tempered as they started unsaddling. Rufe Cralle, a remarkably thin man with pale, cunning eyes, remained in the saddle, fidgeting uneasily.

"Killin' the kid was bad," Rufe said. "It's liable to raise all kinds of hell."

Dark Ben said curtly, "It had to be done. He's been prowlin' and spyin' on us a long time. He figured it was us but he wasn't sure till last night. He saw us round up that bunch of cattle. He followed us into the badlands, right into the cave, and watched us butcher 'em. We'd all been finished, if he'd got away."

"What about the girl?"

"She won't know what happened. His body'll never be found. We looked long enough for it, didn't we?"

Uneasiness lay on the faces of all of them. A rider said, "I shot him twice, and saw him fall into the river. A man not hurt would have a hard time gettin' out of that canyon. This valley'll be hell-hot, if Sherry finds out what happened."

"She won't," Dark Ben said. "That's why we killed Jo-Bob, to keep her from findin' out. And if more come prowlin', more will die. I aim to own this valley, and nobody's big enough to stop me."

"What about this Ballock?"

Dark Ben looked at them, his gaze sharp. "Don't let what's happened give you ideas. I'll kill Ballock. But before I do, I'll show him who's top man."

"He's done lived too long," Rufe said shrilly. "I told you what he wants. He wants me. He knows I helped frame that killin' onto him in Arizona. He'll be comin' after me!"

Dark Ben shrugged.

"Let him come. He'll have to come on this side of the lake to do it, won't he? That's what I want. Get on up to your shack, Rufe. Fill your belly with rotgut and get some of the yellow out of you!"

Rufe turned his horse and rode out of the clearing. He followed a dim trail through the forest, and twenty minutes later emerged into a second smaller clearing that held a dilapidated log cabin. He unsaddled and turned his horse into a corral. He took a stone jug from behind some hay, upended it and drank deeply. Rufe was worried—worried about Ballock, and the shooting of Jo-Bob Cralle the night before.

As he pushed open the door to his squalid cabin and entered, something jabbed hard against his spine. A cold voice said:

"Freeze, mister."

Rufe froze, quick terror yammering through him. He felt a hand take his gun. Even before a hand on his shoulder turned him, he knew the man he faced was Ballock.

Ballock held a gun in his left hand. "A long jump from Arizona, Kurf."

"What you talkin' about?" Rufe blustered. "My name's Rufe Cralle, and I don't know nothin' about Arizona. Who're you—what do you want?"

Ballock looked at him a long moment. "Whatever your name is, you're the man. Skinny hooked nose, pale eyes, bald. In Arizona they called you Sam Kurf."

"I tell you, I ain't—"

Ballock struck suddenly, lashing his right fist into Rufe's face. The blow slammed Rufe backward against the wall, where he slid to the floor, dazed. Ballock stooped, ripped aside his shirt. He crouched there looking at the livid scar, shaped like an X,

on the left side of the man's chest. And he knew that here was living proof that Sam Kurf had not died.

He dragged Rufe roughly to his feet. "We're goin' outa here, mister. You can go dead or alive, as you please, but you're goin'!"

"*You're not goin' anywhere, Bucko,*" a voice whipped at him.

BALLOCK stood still, his gun-muzzle against Rufe's stomach. He knew that his triumph at finding Sam Kurf had deadened his senses to danger. He turned his head slowly.

Dark Ben bulked in the doorway, gun in hand. Other faces showed behind Dark Ben. The heads and shoulders of two others loomed at a window.

He said quietly, "Shoot me—and Rufe Cralle will come right along with me."

"Kill him and be damned," Dark Ben growled. "That won't help you. Drop your gun!"

Ballock obeyed, Dark Ben came into the cabin. Four gunmen followed.

Rufe rubbed his jaw and whined, "Kill 'im, Ben—kill 'im quick, while you got the chance!"

"No hurry," the buckskin-clad giant said. He smiled tightly at Ballock. "You finally made a mistake, friend. You got out from behind a petticoat."

Ballock shrugged. "Men make mistakes. You've got a gun—afraid to use it?"

"What's your hurry? If you die too quick, you won't profit by your mistakes. The first one was down in Saddle Bow."

Ballock grinned jeeringly. "The time I put you into the street, you mean? You looked funny, lyin' there on your back in the dust, kickin' your feet like a rooster with its head off."

The barb hung deep into Dark Ben. Cold fury shone in his eyes. He asked very softly, "You think it was funny? I'll show you just how funny it was."

He struck savagely at Ballock's face. The unexpected blow hurled Ballock backward through the doorway and to the ground outside. Dark Ben, casting his gun aside, followed in a headlong, diving leap. Ballock, his mind reeling, instinctively guessed what was coming—and rolled. Dark Ben hit the ground like a big cat,

twisted swiftly and came back to his feet.

Ballock was already up. He was still dizzy. Dark Ben seemed a grotesque, misshapen figure with gray tendrils of mist from the nearby creek curling about him. Then Dark Ben came at Ballock, half-crouched, swinging a malletlike fist at his head. Ballock ducked, slamming his shoulder into the giant's stomach.

Dark Ben grunted with pain and surprise, bringing his fists down savagely at the back of Ballock's neck. But Ballock was coming up fast—slammed his skull against Dark Ben's chin with a sound like a pistol shot. The dark giant's head snapped back, and Ballock leaped in, hammering at his face. Dark Ben took it, stayed on his feet.

Dark Ben's riders had formed a half-circle about them—jeering at Ballock, yelling encouragement at Dark Ben.

Dark Ben charged again, like a monstrous black panther with a panther's incredible speed and fury. Ballock braced, and they stood toe-to-toe, slugging, driving at each other with terrific, jarring blows.

Before the utter savagery of the fight, Dark Ben's riders gradually fell silent. This was no ordinary fight between ordinary men. They were two giants out of the Dark Ages, knowing no civilized rules or thoughts. They were two writhing, whirling, mauling shapes come up out of the shifting gray mists that shrouded them to do battle. Now they were on their feet, battering, grappling—now they were on the damp red earth, rolling, like jungle cats.

They rolled to the edge of the tiny clearing, dim figures in the gray mists. Then they vanished from the sight of the watchers, rolling down the sloping embankment into the shallow creek. The watchers didn't stir. They couldn't see the fighters, but they could hear the harsh rasping of bodies, the pound of boots on rock, the splashing of water. This went on for what seemed a long time. Then, gradually, the sounds ceased—and they heard a single man clambering up the embankment.

They stood very still, watching as the figure reached the top of the embankment and took shape. It was Reef Ballock.

He stood there a moment, swaying, a grim, blood-smeared figure, his clothes half torn from his body. Then he walked slowly forward, said:

"Anybody else see anything funny? Or would you rather do it with guns?"

No one moved or spoke. They didn't know whether Dark Ben was alive or dead. Without him they were lost.

Then their gaze shifted. They were looking beyond Ballock. Dark Ben had staggered up out of the creek and stood at the top of the embankment. He was looking at Ballock. He had a long-bladed knife in his hand. Words came from Dark Ben's battered mouth:

"You're a better man than I thought, friend. You beat me fair and square. But that won't get you anything here—except six inches of steel."

He moved toward Ballock, slowly, relentlessly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Devil's Canyon

THE slender, denim-clad figure of Sherry Cralle darted from behind the cabin, ran in between Ballock and Dark Ben. Her eyes were blazing angrily. She had a .38 in her hand. Facing the knife-wielding giant, she said very calmly, "Dark Ben, if you take another step—I'll kill you."

Dark Ben stopped. His battered face showed stark anger. "Sherry, you've got no business here. This bucko came lookin' for trouble—and he found it."

"I saw what happened. He beat you fair, and now you're not man enough to take it. You're yellow!"

Dark Ben stood there, coldly angry, saying nothing.

She asked scornfully, "Do you want your men to kill me, Dark Ben? That's what they'll have to do, before you touch Reef Ballock with that knife. You can kill us both. But the valley would find out. You know what would happen to you then, Dark Ben?"

"Nobody wants to hurt you, Sherry," Dark Ben said gently. "You can go, whenever you want to."

"I'm going now—and Reef Ballock's going with me. Try to stop us, and I'll turn the whole valley on you." Then she said to Ballock, "come on, Reef—my horse is back in the timber with yours."

Ballock took what he knew was his only

chance to live. He turned and walked with the girl toward the edge of the clearing.

A murmur rose among Dark Ben's followers. Rufe Cralle whined, "Stop 'em, Ben—they'll put a noose about all our necks!"

Dark Ben said flatly, "You—shut your damned face!"

Ballock and Sherry left the clearing. They walked a hundred yards through the dripping timber, to where he'd left his horse. Sherry's buckskin was tied beside the black. They mounted and rode west toward the lake. . . .

Back in the clearing, Dark Ben said, "Use your brains, if you've got any! We might get by with killin' Jo-Bob, but kill the girl and red hell would hit the valley. Besides, she don't know anything. She just took a hand because she's sweet on this Ballock. She don't know the kid's dead—she don't suspect it's us who've been lootin' the valley. We'll get Ballock, later, but we have to let him go this time."

Sounds of a running horse came through the timber. The rider, a tousled, hard-eyed youngster named Deke Snow, burst into the clearing and dragged his lathered horse to a stop.

"Hell's to pay, Ben!" he said excitedly. "Jo-Bob didn't die in that canyon last night!"

Thunderstruck silence held the group for a moment. Then Dark Ben reached great hands and dragged the youngster from the saddle, shaking him savagely.

"You mean, the kid's still alive?"

"No, he's dead now all right. But, somehow, he got out of that canyon last night and made it to Hannibal Cralle's place. Hannibal tied him on a bronc and took him to Sherry. I saw them take Jo-Bob into the house and he was alive, was talkin'. In Gateway, I heard Hannibal tell how Jo-Bob had come raggin' himself up out of the bottoms, more dead than alive. But Jo-Bob hadn't told Hannibal about who shot him, or anything."

"You sure of that?"

"Yeah. He told Sherry, though, you can depend on that. Later—maybe an hour after they brought him home—word come that Jo-Bob was dead. A little later, Sherry got on her buckskin and headed north, on this side of the lake. I followed her a long time but lost her in the timber. I

tried to find her but couldn't, then headed hell-bent here to tell you."

"Did Sherry talk to anybody else?"

"Not a soul. She seemed in a hurry."

"That means she's the only one who knows. If she gets away—we're all through. And I don't want to catch her. Her or Ballock. Shoot them down. Hit leather!"

Ballock and the girl had gone less than a mile when they heard the sounds of horses behind them. They were riding along the edge of a grassy meadow. They looked back and saw several horsemen, among them Dark Ben, ride from the timber. A rifle crashed, and the snarling bullet missed Sherry's head by inches.

Instantly, they wheeled into the dense timber. Other rifles roared back there, the bullets cutting twigs from the trees about them. They heard the yelling voices of men, shrill and savage. They gained the shelter of a shallow ravine, spurred along it a hundred yards, left it and crossed a timbered ridge. It was mid-morning now, but mist still hovered in low places; the forest was still chill and damp from the night.

The guns and the yelling voices had died behind them. But they knew Dark Ben was circling to cut them off, to hem them against the lake and keep them away from Gateway. They rode fast for ten minutes, the wet branches whipping at their faces. Finally they paused in a thicket to get their bearings and let their horses blow.

Sherry's face was white and still, and now he saw grief in her eyes. Ballock was puzzled. Dark Ben had let them go—and then suddenly he was trying to kill them.

He said, "You'd better leave me, Sherry. They won't harm you—they just want me."

VERY quietly, she said, "You're wrong, Reef. They want to kill me, even more than they do you. . . . Last night Jo-Bob trucked down the raiders who have been looting and killing for the last two years. Like you suspected, Dark Ben is the leader of the gang."

Ballock asked, "How did he get the rustled cattle over the peaks at the end of the valley?"

"He didn't," Sherry said. "In the badlands at the lower end of the valley, where the river goes out through a canyon, they

have a regular underground slaughter house. The cattle are driven through the hidden entrance of a tunnel, into a big cavern, where they are killed and quartered. Another outlet opens into the river canyon. The beef is carried through the canyon at night, in skiffs, and down to the mining town of Snake Bar where it is sold. Jo-Bob followed them last night into the slaughter cavern—" Sherry paused, bit her lip.

"And Jo-Bob—?" asked Ballock gently.

"They shot him. He fell into the canyon and hit deep water. He didn't remember how he got out and dragged himself to Hannibal Cralle's place. Hannibal is our friend, so he brought Jo-Bob home. Jo-Bob told me all he knew, and then—he died."

Ballock was quiet a moment, feeling oddly helpless and shocked before her deep, quiet grief. That explains it, he thought. *They want to kill her before she tells what she knows.* But why had they let her go, back there at Rufe Cralle's cabin?

Sherry saw his puzzled expression and exclaimed: "They thought Jo-Bob died last night. They didn't know he'd talked to me, not when they let us go back there. Then—someway—they found out."

"We'll ride on," Ballock said. He took Sherry's .38 Colt.

They shunned the meadows, keeping to the forest and ravines. Suddenly a rifle blasted at them through the underbrush.

They swerved to the south and spurred in a headlong race for the lake, which was close now. But other riders forced them back to the north, so that when they finally reached the lake it was at the extreme lower end. As they rode out onto the lake shore, a bullet snapped waspishly past their heads. They saw smoke curl from a cedar clump beside the lake a hundred yards away.

The gunman yelled triumphantly, "There they are—I've got 'em blocked off!"

And Dark Ben's voice, from back in the shadowy forest, "Turn 'em back—make 'em go down river!"

They had no choice—swerved to the right and sent their horses slashing through the thickets lining the lake shore. They came to a shack huddled at the foot of the lake slightly below the spot where it narrowed into a river. Here the water was

relatively placid, the current gradually increasing in rapidity until, a quarter mile below, it plunged whitely between towering red walls. This was Devil's Canyon, a mile long, through which the river lunged in a chaotic turmoil of deadly, rock-filled rapids and whirlpools.

Sherry cried out, "We've got to cross the river—it's our only chance to escape. The water is too deep and swift for them to swim their horses across. . . . There's Tod Coffee's boat!"

They leaped from their saddles. Ballock had already seen the sturdy, flat-bottomed boat tied at the river's edge, and now they ran toward it. A couple of scrawny hounds came barking and growling at them from under the shack. A bearded, scarecrow of a man, carrying a rifle, came from the shack and moved toward them.

The girl warned Ballock, "Tod Coffee is Dark Ben's man."

Ballock ran at the boat and started untying the rope that held it to a sapling.

Tod Coffee came toward them and called out, "—Just a minute, there! What's up—what's the shootin' about?"

"We're taking your boat, Tod, to cross the river in," Sherry said.

Coffee said, "Not so fast! Who's after you—what's the shootin' about? You, mister, get away from that boat!"

Ballock had the rope untied. He straightened. "We need this boat—we're taking it. Be careful with that rifle!"

Instead, Tod Coffee stopped, shifted the rifle muzzle toward them and raised the weapon. Ballock shot him through the shoulder. He watched Coffee drop the rifle, turn and take half a dozen steps back toward the shack then sit down dazedly.

Sherry leaped into the boat. Ballock followed, grabbing up the oars. Just then three riders broke out of the timber at the edge of the clearing two hundred yards away. Neither of them was Dark Ben. They didn't sight the boat immediately. But they saw Tod Coffee there on the ground and came on toward him. They jumped down and started yelling at Coffee. The man was conscious, but he seemed dazed. It was a full minute before he pointed toward the river.

By then the boat was almost to the middle of the river, with Ballock rowing desperately. And by then several other riders,

headed by Dark Ben, had plunged from the timber. The men at the cabin, instead of grabbing their rifles from their saddles, started firing their six shooters. The bullets kicked up tiny geysers of water near the boat.

Dark Ben and the others rode up. Dark Ben jumped to the ground, jerked his rifle from its scabbard and threw it to his shoulder. Ballock felt the bullet's breath on his cheek.

He grabbed the girl and pushed her to the bottom of the boat. He crouched down beside her, shielding her with his body, both of them shielded by the thick side of the boat. He said:

"They'd cut us to pieces up there. We'll have to trust the current to take us out of range."

Gunfire drummed steadily there on the river bank now. Bullets snarled over them, thudded into the boat, splashed into the water. Then suddenly the boat was whirling around and seemed to be racing along with incredible speed as if powerful, unseen hands were pulling it. The water leaped and moaned about them.

Ballock sat up quickly.

Mist was rising up from the water. Through the vapors he could see the wet red walls that marked the entrance to Devil's Canyon. He could see dimly Dark Ben's crew back there on the river bank. They weren't firing now; their guns dangled in their hands as they stared after the boat.

HE LOOKED at the girl. Her face was white, and she said sharply, "Try to get us to the bank—don't let the water pull us into the canyon. Nobody has ever gone through it!"

He dug in the oars, but it only served to make the boat whirl crazily, and he knew then that the river had hold of the boat. He fought it with all his strength and cunning—knowing it was useless. The wet, red mouth of the canyon yawned wider. He could see the leaping white water as it plunged into the fissure, could hear its deep-throated, greedy roar.

He held onto the oars, fighting stubbornly, desperately, although there was little he could do. They were running bow-first, faster and faster, straight into the sullen, grumbling roar ahead, straight into the yawning red mouth with white waves

slaving over the jutting, fang-like rocks.

He looked again at the girl. She knew they were helpless. She smiled at him and said something he couldn't hear. Then suddenly the boat lunged straight between the dripping red walls, caught up in a confused roar and jar and whirl that flung him forward to his knees. When he struggled upright he saw with amazement that they were still afloat, and inside the canyon. Ragged, gleaming walls lifted sheer on each side, and they were being driven through a weird, mist-filled tunnel at dizzying speed.

He braced his feet, clinging to the oars. He looked again at Sherry, and saw that she was still smiling slightly. Little light penetrated here, except for the reddish glow that seemed to radiate from the cliffs. Water leaped and boiled through boulder-filled rapids directly ahead of them. Ballock tried to find an open channel through the rapids, but could see none. He eased forward on his knees, braced against each side of the boat. He pulled Sherry forward into his arms and held her there tightly against him.

The boat lunged forward as it reached the head of the rapids. The bow lifted, then dropped suddenly, and they plunged sickeningly into a roaring, whirling, hammering maelstrom. Feet braced against the boat's gunwales, Ballock held the girl's slim body tightly. Everything was a blur

before his eyes. He lost all feeling of time and of sanity. Each minute was interminable.

Suddenly a boulder, black and slimy, half as big as a house, loomed directly before them. They struck with a sickening crash. Ballock felt himself lifted, hurled with stunning impact against the boulder. He felt icy water close over him, hammer at him, roll him over and over in its chill clutches. A tremendous roaring was in his ears.

But he had never relaxed his hold on the girl. Holding her with one arm, he struck out frantically with the other, and felt her helping him. After what seemed ages, their heads broke the surface.

They gulped down great lungfuls of the cold air. Ballock's shoulder banged into something hard. He clutched at it with his free hand and clung. It was the ragged rim of a low ledge jutting out between the canyon wall and the water. He felt his fingers slipping, and he heard the girl say close to his ear:

"Use both hands—I'll help you!"

He felt one of her arms clasped tightly about his neck. He released her and gripped the ledge with both hands. She helped him and slowly, reluctantly the river released them. They pulled themselves onto the narrow, slippery rock ledge—and lay there completely exhausted, faces against the cold rock. . . .

**YOU CAN'T
HURT MY
FEELINGS!**

**I KNOW IT
- I USE
STAR BLADES!**



CHAPTER SIX

Blood In the Dust

IT HAD been Hannibal Cralle who brought young Jo-Bob, wounded and dying, out of the badlands. And now it was Hannibal who brought Ballock and Sherry to the big white house below Gateway, in a buckboard and in the dead of night. Hannibal had searched Devil's Canyon until he had found Sherry and Ballock.

In the white house, after giving certain orders to Hannibal, Ballock lay down across a bed and for eight hours slept like a dead man. He was awakened by Hannibal shaking him vigorously. He arose, bathed his face in cold water then strapped on a cedar-handled .45 he'd borrowed from Hannibal.

Hannibal said, "Dark Ben rode into Gateway an hour ago. Several of his riders are along, but you won't need to worry about them. Sheriff John Tiger is there, too. I've talked to him."

"Do like I told you," Ballock said.

Hannibal went out, got back on his horse and rode down the lake toward Gateway. Ballock went downstairs, hoping to see Sherry but she was nowhere in sight. Perhaps she was in the closed room at the base of the stairs, with the dead Jo-Bob. He hesitated, then went on out and to the corrals. He saw none of the punchers, no one. The valley was very still and quiet.

He saddled a big sorrel, mounted and rode toward Gateway. Reaching the head of the street, he dismounted, tied the sorrel at a rack and started walking slowly down the middle of the red-sandy street. Gateway, too, was quiet, the street empty of men. A dozen horses stood at racks. Before the Laramie Queen saloon stood Dark Ben's ornately bedecked gelding.

Ballock walked slowly on, still weary from the beating he'd taken, eyes fixed unwaveringly on the Laramie Queen. Dark Ben was inside. In a few seconds he would come out, unless all of Ballock's calculations were haywire. By now, Hannibal Cralle had carried out his appointed task.

He would have told Dark Ben: "Ballock says tell you he's comin' after you. He says come out, or he'll come in after you!"

By now Dark Ben would know that

Ballock and the girl hadn't died in the river. In his mind would be the certain conviction that the whole valley knew of his treachery and thievery. He could choose between this final showdown with Ballock—or a wild try for escape.

Ballock knew what Dark Ben's choice would be. Dark Ben's arrogance and pride wouldn't let him run. He was still deadly, treacherous, vindictive—but he wouldn't run.

The doors of the Laramie Queen opened, and Dark Ben came slowly out. He stopped, standing on wide-spread legs. Unhurriedly he rolled a cigarette. He put the cigarette in his mouth, but he didn't light it. He stood looking at Ballock as if in hard, deep thought.

Ballock stopped. The settlement was very quiet. He was aware of faces at windows, without seeing them, and somewhere beyond the settlement's edge he heard a hard-running horse.

Dark Ben had stepped down to the ground. He walked toward Ballock, slowly, head bent to one side so that he watched Ballock from a slanted position. He was a man wholly intent on only one thing—killing Reef Ballock, the only man who had ever beaten him, humiliated him and finally brought him to this.

Dark Ben came to within fifty feet of Ballock, and stopped. The unlighted cigarette sagged in a corner of his lips.

Ballock heard the running horse in the street behind him now. He said, "I've come to finish this, Dark Ben. I'm ready when you are."

"I'll be ready," Dark Ben said, "when Sherry gets out from behind you!" Treacherous to the last he leaped sideways, grabbing for his gun.

Ballock hadn't been fooled. He drew and fired, and he watched Dark Ben's big body quiver and turn half around. Dark Ben's gun was half drawn—and now he drew it wholly, turning its muzzle with slow doggedness toward Ballock.

Deliberately, Ballock shot him again. Dark Ben dropped his gun then; he went down on his knees, his eyes no longer wicked, but dumb and dulling with the knowledge inside him. Then Dark Ben fell suddenly forward on his face, his life's blood only a little darker than the street sand it dampened.

Ballock stood there, looking at the still figure, aware that Gateway was no longer quiet. A gunshot crashed inside the Laramie Queen saloon. Men yelled. Boots beat hard against plank as a man ran along the street. Other gunshots beat hard upon the first one, and smoke boiled from the Laramie Queen's windows.

Ballock stood there motionless, watching, feeling oddly detached from what was happening now. He saw four men break from the saloon, guns in hand, and run toward a bunch of horses at a rack. A gun roared and smoke spouted from a saloon window, and one of the running men stumbled and fell.

The man was Red Fargo. He rolled on his stomach and lay still.

The three others made it to their horses. They leaped into saddles and spurred wildly along the street. Half a dozen men ran from the saloon and started shooting at the riders. But the horsemen made it out of town, headed south toward the Pass. Nobody pursued them. These three, Ballock knew, were the last the valley would ever see of Dark Ben's killer gang. Peace had come to the land of the Cralles.

Men came into the street and gathered

THE END

about Reef Ballock. They spoke to him, but he didn't hear what they said, hardly saw them. He was looking past them, at a rawboned figure that had come from a building and was crossing toward him. Sheriff John Tiger was pushing Rufe Cralle, manacled and bedraggled, before him. John Tiger pushed forward, looking dourly from Dark Ben to Ballock.

He said, "About what I expected. This your man?"

Ballock nodded. "That's the man I knew as Sam Kurf. When I explain why I wanted him—"

"You don't need to explain anything," the lawman grunted. "A girl done that yesterday. So when this galoot rode into town this mornin' I made it a p'int to grab him and keep him hawg-tied in my hotel room. Figured you'd be along, if you was alive. Figured it'd take a cyclone and a spoutin' volcano to kill you. . . ."

Ballock had stopped listening to the sheriff. He was looking at a slim, golden-haired figure standing on the fringe of the crowd. Sherry Cralle was looking at him soberly, head on one side, as he had seen her once before. But now she smiled suddenly, warmly, and came toward him. . . .

Make Mine Rare!

Today, with the scarcity of a certain type victual some prefer smothered with onions, it isn't difficult to imagine cowboys singing an old song of the plains with new and poignant meaning:

Give me the plains

Where it seldom rains

And the wind forever blows;

It is where I would be

Though there's never a tree

And the farther you look

The less you see

For there's where the *beefsteak*
grows.



Texican, Tie Down Your Scalp!

By
FRED GIPSON



Then the little squirt
comes ridin' up. . . .

*Me an' Big Foot Wallace can't die in peace till we confess the wrong
we did—when them lowdown, thievin' Injuns cleaned out the Medina
spread.*

ME'N Big Foot Wallace'll both be pushing up the grass roots when this is read. But when the years has got a strangle-holt on a man and the Long Trail is just around the next bend in the road, he likes to settle his accounts and clear his conscience before they spank him in the face with a spade.

What's nagging my mind is this little writer gent and how he saves our bacon in a brush we have with a bunch of Lipan heathens up on the head of the Guadalupe.

His name's slipped out of pocket, but Big Foot calls him Mr. Author. If it wasn't for him, me'n Big Foot and about twenty-five other Texicans wouldn't be wearing our hair today.

This occurrence takes place back when I'm a yearling in the Texas Ranger force stationed at Santone. Big Foot, he's been a ranger captain in his time, but now he's retired and holding shotgun rights on a piece of land up on the Medina River.

When he first settles there, Big Foot is

the only white man in a country overrun with Lipan Injuns and he figures it smart to make a peace treaty with the heathen. So he sends out an invite to old Chief Smells-Bad-When-He-Walks and his bucks to come sup with him. Which they do. And the way them noble redmen stack away the bear meat and wild honey makes good listening when Big Foot tells about it later.

Just before the honey starts running out of his ears, old Smells-Bad-When-He-Walks raises from his buffalo robe and makes Big Foot a grand speech. He tells the captain that he's a tophand scrapper and a hunter and the Lipan is beholden to him for the way he's filled their bellies. He lays it on thick in other ways and winds up his spiel with a promise that from now on Big Foot can rest easy—there'll never be a hide nor hoof of his stuff stole as long as Smells-Bad-When-He-Walks is holding the whip-hand.

They top off the big feed with a puff of peace-pipe smoke and a round of Big Foot's jug. That ratifies the treaty and the matter's settled.

That is, until about ten years later—the time I'm speaking of—when the settlers start crowding in and the Lipans conclude to emigrate from that part of the country to the head-waters of the Guadalupe. Then the sight of Big Foot's range stocked with good horses and mules is too big a temptation. Smells-Bad-When-He-Walks sends the squaws and papooses on ahead. Then he proceeds to wipe Big Foot's range clean.

Big Foot don't suspect his friends till he follers the trail of hoof-prints a piece and runs into an arrow he recognizes for a Lipan weapon, on account of a fox tail carved in the wood. Then he knows what a scurvy trick's been played on him and he's sure mad. He hoofs it in to Santone and hits up our ranger captain for help to bring them Lipans a bill of goods they'll have a hard time paying for.

Our captain is an old ranger mate of Big Foot's and he's willing. He details about twenty-five men to go with the old Injun hunter. We're furnished with four pack mules and rations to do a month and told that Big Foot's our commander-in-chief. We ride out to Big Foot's ranch, reaching there too late to take up the Injun trail that day. And just at sunset when the writer gent enters the picture.

He rides up on a glass-eyed paint hoss. He's wearing a suit of buckskin that ain't been made for him. There's a pair of blind-bridle spectacles hiding his eyesight and a stove-pipe hat on his head. An umbrella strapped behind his saddle don't leave no room for speculation. He's a greener from the ground up and if he's got the sense of a blind goose in a hailstorm, the fact ain't sticking out on him nowhere.

He flashes a bucktooth grin at Big Foot and remarks: "Well, Captain, you see I'm up to time, armed and equipped as the law allows!"

"I'm mighty glad to see you, Mr. Author," says Big Foot. "In a few days I think I can promise you a little insight into the ways of the wilderness."

I get my breath then and exclaim: "Hell, Big Foot, what brand of varmint is this the dogs have drug in?"

"Now, looky here, Bill Sykes," says Big Foot, turning a warlike look on me. "This is a writer gent I encountered in Santone. He's engaged in writing a book about the west and I've agreed to take him on this scouting trip to give him a chance at some first-hand information. You'll show him some respect or I'll personally see that your name never goes down in this history of Texas."

BIG FOOT'S six feet tall and has proved himself an all-'round hand in any man's bear fight. When he speaks like this, a young ranger don't hand him back any sass. But when I meet his eyes, I see a glint in them that takes the edge off his words and I know by the way one of his eyebrows is standing high that he's up to something. Big Foot has his own particular brand of humor and I've knowed him to spend a week's time arranging a set-up for one big laugh. I back off and hold my trap shut.

But some of the other boys don't. They've crowded around the little author, looking him over like he's some strange sort of varmint they've caught in a trap.

Ernie Kyle, a big double-jointed ranger with a cud of eating tobacco bulging his jaw comes up. "Howdy, stranger," he greets and points at the author's umbrella. "What d'you call that thing you've got strapped to your saddle there?"

"Why, that," says our author, looking

surprised, "is what is commonly termed an umbrella. It's used as a protection against the sun and rain."

"Do tell!" says Ernie, grinning. He calls to some of the others. "Come here, boys! Here's a gent going on a scout with an umbrella!"

"Well, hang me with a spider web!" says Papalote Kirby. "Ain't that thinking ahead. He can h'ist that protector and it won't make a damn if it's raining Injuns."

The little author's beginning to look excited and Big Foot busts in on the boys' hoorawing. "My friend," he says gentle-like, "didn't you bring a pistol? I told you there'd be danger and you'd need a pistol."

"Why," says the little man, fishing around in his pockets, "I brought a pistol. I've got it here somewhere."

And I wish I may be kicked to death by grasshoppers if he don't drag out of a pocket a little pepper box of a gun I could hide in my hand.

"Here it is," he says, and pulls the trigger.

The thing pops off right there in the middle of the crowd and we scatter like flushed turkeys.

"Rope it!" hollers Jeff Johnson and dives behind the same tree I'm heading for.

This excites the little author and he keeps pulling the trigger.

"Pitch it in the creek!" squalls Pike Erherd.

But the little author don't. He's so rattled that he empties every cylinder before he drops the thing like a hot potato. Then he piles off his horse and hits for the house on the run while we slap our legs and whoop and holler.

We're in luck and nobody's hit, and after that we're tickled to death with our author. We'd a-rode him to death that first night, but Big Foot interferes.

"He's mine, boys," says Big Foot, grinning. "I found him first and we've got to handle him gentle if we aim for him to last the trip out."

So, while the rest of us bed down under the trees outside, Big Foot fixes up the author with a special bed inside the cabin. It's a buffalo robe, spread on the floor, with an ebony wood maul for a pillow. And since Big Foot's old dog Tige's been using that robe for his special sleeping spread, the fleas are some numerous. When the author com-

plains the next morning, Big Foot asks him: "Where'd you get that buckskin suit you got on?"

"Why, I bought it from a halfbreed," our author says.

"Then," says Big Foot, handing me the wink, "you better keep out of old Tige's way. If he ever finds out you got his bed lousy, he'll take the seat out of your pants."

"Lousy!" yelps the little writer gent, and skins out for the creek where he peels his garments and scrubs and combs for half an hour.

From then on, we lead that poor little old feller a dog's life. And when Big Foot or some of the balance of the party ain't thinking up some kind of horseplay stunt to pull on him, the little author is blundering into some sore of jackpot on his own hook. The things that happen to that little word wrangler ought'n to happen to a sheep-killing dog.

TAKE that first night out on the trail. We ain't crowded the Lipans none. Like Big Foot points out, they've done got a big start on us, so there's no hopes of overhauling them before they make it to where they're going. So we might as well travel at a slow gait and keep our horses in top shape for the long trail ahead. Which we do, making only about twenty miles that first day and going to roost early in a little valley where there's plenty of graze and a bold spring of water.

Big Foot's taken the little author under his wing, as a man says, and is sharing his hotroll with him. Midnight's coming on when I'm woke by a roaring in the brush. About the same time I hear the little author sing out.

"Captain," he says, shaking Big Foot, "what's that roaring I hear like a charge of cavalry?"

Big Foot sits up with his ears stretched. Like me, he knows right off what's up.

"That there's a gully-humper rain coming, my friend," says Big Foot. "We're in for a ducking."

Mr. Author comes out of his blankets, headed for his saddle. "I'll take care of that," he says, proud-like. "You men'll find that an umbrella is not such a bad article to have on a scout, after all."

He comes back, spreading his umbrella, and for a minute I'm wishing I'd offered to

share my blankets with him. But about the time he's got his umbrella hoisted over him and Big Foot, the squall hits us. She mortally is a-humming and a-coming. She hits that umbrella, turns her wrong-side-out. The next gust snatches her out of the little gent's hands. He squeals like somebody's stuck him with a knife when that rain protector disappears into the night.

The rain's tromping right on the heels of this wind and she's a chunk-floating storm if I ever see one.

"Captain," squeals the little gent, "what'll we do now? If this keeps up, we'll all perish in the storm."

"Tuck in your shirttail, my friend," encourages Big Foot. "If we don't wash away and drown, we're liable to pull through in fine shape. Think what a chapter this'll make in your book."

"If I ever live to write it," says Mr. Author, burying his head under the blanket and taking it like the rest of us.

It's a soggy, sorry-looking bunch of Injun fighters that rolls out at daylight, wet to the last stitch and resembling the losing end of a dogfight. It's big Ernie Kyle that sights the umbrella. It's hung in the top of a mesquite bush about fifty yards from our bedground.

"Looky yonder!" exclaims Ernie, dragging his pistol. "A turkey, roosting right here in camp. If my powder ain't wet, I'll git us fresh meat for breakfast." And he cuts down on the umbrella.

This rouses the camp. Jeff Johnson drags out his rifle. "Never seen one of them new-fangled short guns that could hit a corn crib with the door shut. It takes a long rifle to bring a turkey out of a roost." And he cut down on the author's umbrella.

Papalote Kirby concludes it ain't no turkey to begin with. "It's a buzzard, it 'pears to me like," he says. "I calculate he's sitting there, figuring we're all drowned. Just waiting for the sun to come up and ripen our meat a little before he takes on a breakfast." So Papalote wastes a shot.

Time we've all plugged a hole in that umbrella, we're feeling better about the wetting we've taken the night before. The little author, he stands and watches our shooting and don't say a word till we're finished. Then he still don't say nothing. He just walks out and takes down his umbrella, shuts it up and ties it back on his saddle.

He don't say nothing for the rest of the morning, but there's a sort of sad-like, hurt look in his eyes that gets under my skin for awhile. I can feel my conscience kicking up a row about the way we're dragging him over the coals.

A real man could have said some little something to make the little gent feel better about it all. But I never said it. Nor nobody else.

Besides being a writer, this monkey gent has a streak of curiosity a yard wide running down his back. Every evening while the rest of us is pitching camp, he goes off into the woods, gophering around, hoping he'll find something. He fills his saddle bags with specimens. And they ain't gold, neither, because me'n Jeff Johnson sneak a look into his bags one day to find out. It looks strange to us. This little old duck is greener than a cutseed watermelon in the woods. What's he hunting for?

"That feller," states Jeff, "is crazier'n a bedbug and if he toted ar'y weepoon that a man could consider dangerous, I'd keep an eye peeled for him."

It's while he's on one of these private prowls that he gets himself in a couple or three jackpots that furnishes us all with plenty of entertainment to keep the trip from going stale.

ONE time he opens with his pepper-box gun on an old buck deer that's crippled and ornery with the pain of screw worms. When me'n Big Foot answer his call for help, we find him tromping out a close-circled trench in the dirt around the foot of a mesquite. Behind him, and helping him to a faster gait, is a big old buck with antlers the size of a rocking chair.

It's a sight to watch and remember, and me'n Big Foot get our money's worth. We stand off and holler encouragement at the little gent, telling him if he'll just throw on a mite extra batch of speed, he's bound to catch that old buck any minute.

We're sure surprised when Big Foot finally rolls the big buck with a shot from his old Kentucky rifle he calls "Sweet Lips."

Mr. Author explains that he ain't chasing that buck at all. It's the buck chasing him!

Then one evening he prowls off like this and gets himself treed by a bunch of javalina hogs. Now there is a sight to make a

man laugh at on his death bed. Big Foot hears his squawk first. He picks up his rifle and grins back over his shoulder.

"Looks like our author's got himself in another scrape," he says.

"He's fixin'," says Ernie Kyle, "to git his hair lifted, boging around alone, with nothing but that pepper box to fight with. He'd better trust to his umbrell."

When Big Foot don't come back soon, me'n Ernie foller to see what's taking place. About half a mile from camp, we find Mr. Author squatted in the forks of a thorn bush and kicking at a passel of them javalinas that's trying to gnaw the bush out from under him. Somehow, he's made them wild hogs mad and they've ganged him.

They're grunting and squealing and slobbering and popping their teeth. They sure look warlike and it's plain by the look on Mr. Author's face that he thinks his chances are mighty slim.

The little gent is sitting up there with sharp thorns gouging him in the tail and begging Big Foot to shoot and do it in a hurry. But Big Foot, he's perched high up in a hackberry by now, grinning like a cat, and he ain't in no rush. He's lined out on one of his long-winded yarns he's famous for. He's trying to get the author to take notes on a bear hunt he claims him and Bill Hankins makes up on the Leon River one time and he can't seem to understand that if them thornholts ever break out of Mr. Author's tail, them javalinas'll eat author, pencil, notebook and all.

In fact, Big Foot comes close to letting that joke go too far. He admits later that if me'n Ernie hadn't showed up when we did, he'd likely never been able to get his bed-mate out of that jam.

Once, some of the boys take time off to cut a bee-tree to get coffee sweetening and the author learns the hard way about wild bees. And the day Big Foot kills a rattlesnake, he keeps the rattles. That night he takes them to bed with him, along with a twisted piece of grapevine. He runs the grapevine up under the little author's blankets with one hand and rattles the rattles with the other and tells the poor little old whickerbill not to jump—or even move.

"He'll get us sure, if you do, Mr. Author," Big Foot declares.

So the little man freezes where he lays and dies a hundred times whilst Big Foot

keeps the rattles singing and describes all the horrible deaths he's seen occur from snake bite. Then when the little author can't take it no longer and he quits the bed like a cat shot in the seat with a bootjack, screaming bloody murder ever' jump, Big Foot runs and grabs up a shaker of hot pepper sauce and nose-drenches the little cuss. Telling him it's the only sure cure for snake bite ever invented.

Big Foot's sure bent on giving our author plenty first-hand experience for his book.

Like I'm saying, it's sure a frazzled life the little man's leading. But there's a streak of tough rawhide in him somewhere. He takes all we can dish out and instead of going sour on life, it looks like his interest picks up. I know he's getting double what he eats when we start. The belly wrinkles are filling out fine and if he makes the rifle, he'll be packing plenty of taller by the time he lands back in the settlements.

IT'S when we hit that dry stretch that he tears his britches with us. We run onto this dry stretch unexpected and noon catches us with our water gourds nigh empty. We make a dry camp that night and the next day we ain't found a water hole by nooning time again. The weather's hot and men and animals is suffering.

It's too far to go back and a glance ahead at parched grass and withering mesquites shimmering in the sun tells us the outlook ain't cheerful. It's rough going, no mistake. If this Injun sign don't lead to water in the next twenty-four hours, there's some good Texicans fixing to wind up as wolf bait.

The author's bound to be suffering with the balance. That shows in his sun-cracked lips and red-rimmed eyes. But his spirit's still stout. He's getting plenty of raw material now and he's scribbling down notes right along. Then directly he turns to Big Foot and says:

"Captain, will you please order the men to halt for a moment?"

Big Foot don't have no more idea than a bull-bat what's on the little gent's mind. He lifts a hand and hollers: "Halt!"

The men pull up and it's plain they don't like it. Their tongues is beginning to swell and they're horsing to push on and find water. The little author rides out in front of them, like an enrolling officer, and pulls out his notebook.

"My friends," he says, "I hope you will not consider this taking too great a liberty. I'll only detain you a few minutes. All I want is to observe you and get down on paper the correct expression of the human countenance when distorted by pangs of intense thirst. They will aid me materially in working up one of the most thrilling chapters of my forthcoming novel."

Cut me up for mud-cat bait! If it ain't for Big Foot, I reckon we'd murdered the little cuss right there. Ernie Kyle snarls like a wounded grizzly and grabs for the Bowie knife in his belt. Jeff Johnson swings up his rifle and the click of his gun hammer drawn back to full cock is loud in my ears. I find myself wheeling my horse toward the little devil, crazy to get my hands on his throat. Right then, I'd a-wrung his scrawny neck like a rooster's.

"Take it easy, boys!"

It's Big Foot and he's speaking sharp. That stops us from taking our author to a killing right there. But it don't stop us from giving him one of the damndest cussings any man in the whole of Texas has ever taken.

But if you think we faze our author, you've split your loop. Hell, he keeps right on taking his notes. And the bigger the cussing, the faster he writes. His eyes is all lit up with excitement and he keeps exclaiming time and again, "Excellent! Excellent!"

We can see there ain't no way we can touch Big Foot's pet, so we wheel our horses and ride on. But I still figure if he hadn't come on a water hole about sundown, our little author would have woke up the next morning with Ernie Kyle's Bowie sticking in his neck.

All this time we're hanging to that trail

of stole horses like a pack of bloodhounds. A little before sunset one evening, the trail-ers Big Foot sends out ahead ride back to report sight of an Injun camp about six mile ahead.

"How big a camp?" Big Foot wants to know.

"Not too big."

"All right," says Big Foot. "We'll round-side here and move in on 'em just at daylight."

So we go into camp till about three o'clock in the morning. Then we saddle up, look to our powder and ride.

The first streak of daylight's showing when we catch sight of the camp. It's located in a pecan grove in the center of a half-moon valley. The valley is hemmed in by high, cut-bank ridges. The only way in or out is through the draw we're entering. We've stopped the bottle on old Smells-Bad-When-He-Walks and his horse-stealing bucks!

It's plain the heathen have got no suspicions of our approach. The camp is quiet as a church and the smoke of their smouldering campfires is standing straight and tall among the trees and blooming at the top.

"Like umbrellas!" whispers Nat Nathans, an old Rocky Mountain hunter who's wild as a Mexican lion and superstitious as an Injun. It's not till later that I recollect the queer look Nat throws at our author when he says it.

BIG FOOT splits the party in halves and sends Nat with part of it to the left. They're to keep under cover back of a low range of hills and attack the Lipans from the rear, whilst we move up slow from the front. A discharge of guns

TEST SIGHT

TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?



ANSWER

It will reach exactly to the top of the building.



from the first party will signal the bloody assault.

I'm with Big Foot. So's our little author. He's looking pale around the gills. Big Foot says to him: "What information you collect from here on out, Mr. Author, is liable to come at a high price. Make up your mind. Ten minutes from now, it'll be too late."

The little author throws a scared look around him, then stiffens in his saddle.

"Captain," he says, talking like a stump speaker, "no great undertaking is ever accomplished without labor and many difficulties to be overcome. Lead the charge. I'm with you!" And he drags out his pepper box to make sure it's loaded.

We move up, cautious, under cover of a dogwood thicket. When we stick our heads out on the far side, Big Foot pulls up sudden-like and I hear him exclaim: "Hold on, here!"

We freeze. Big Foot's eyes are wide when he turns. Big Foot's hard to booger, but he's excited now.

"Boys," he says. "Them trailers slipped up about the size of this camp. It extends plumb around this thicket and a quarter of a mile on yon side. We've set out a gopher trap and ketched us a grizzly bear!"

He says to me: "Bill, tear out down yonder and stop Nat before his bunch opens fire. If we jump this big camp, our notes'll be taken to a certainty."

But it's too late. Before I get out of the thicket, Nat and his bunch open with a keen report of a dozen rifles.

"Let it go, Bill. The fat's in the fire!" I hear Big Foot holler. So I wheel my horse and spur him out into the open, trailing Big Foot and his bunch.

The first glance tells me we've sure bought ourselves a bill of goods here. Big Foot and the balance of my party has done spurred into the Lipan village, jumped to the ground, and is pouring a deadly fire into the teepees. The Injuns is taken by surprise, just like we had it figured. But it's like poking a stick into a hornet's nest. There's yelping warriors swarming out of them teepees by the hundreds.

Right there's where Bill Sykes, a young Texas Ranger, comes clost to tucking his tail and cutting for tall timber. And maybe I'd a-done it, but about then an arrow whistles past Jeff Johnson's head and drops my horse like you'd hit him between the ears

with the butt-end of a loaded quirt. I kick out of stirrups in time to keep from getting caught under, and there I am—right in the thick of the fight.

Even then, our party might have retreated and made a clean get-away, if it hadn't been for leaving Nat Nathan and his bunch to get slaughtered by overpowering numbers. Out in the opening here, we can see them, a couple of hundred yards away. Nat has moved in too fast and now a swarm of heathen have cut him off from any chance of escape.

Fast shooting with their revolvers is downing Injuns in piles, but Nat and his bunch are going to get their hair lifted if somebody can't give them a boost. Big Foot can see this, too, and hollers for us to mount and fight through to Nat.

Me—I've got no horse, so I grab onto Ernie Kyle's stirrup and run beside his mount.

That two-hundred yard run is the longest I ever make in my life. The dogwood arrows are as thick in the air as shedding leaves in a high wind. The shrill yelping of the savages beats against my ears and sends streams of ice water running down my backbone. I reload my revolver on that run and empty it into that wall of howling heathen pressing in on us.

I get an Injun each shot, but what's the use? Down one, and there's two popping up to take his place. The yelping devils is pressing in so close that I can smell the stinking bear grease on their hides, right through the scent of dust and burnt gunpowder.

Some of the boys pick up a wound or two on that run, but we make it through to Nat and his bunch. That is, all but the little author. And the muss is too thick for anybody to see what happens to him, or even miss him, for that matter.

There Big Foot hollers: "Looks like our notes is due, boys! But give 'em hell while we last!"

Which we do. And our combined fire halts their rush and backs them up a little. But it's no use. They've got us hemmed in from all sides. Before this day's done, there'll be a bunch of Texican scalps hanging to the lodgepoles and drying in the prairie breeze.

That's when the little author saves our bacon. Where we lose him on the run, we

don't know. How he's still managing to wear his hair is a mystery he can't even explain to us later—he claims he's too scared at the time to recollect. All we know is that during a sudden lull in fighting that comes after we join forces with Nat, we hear a commotion fifty or sixty yards away. We look up, and yonder comes our author.

He's spurring that glass-eyed paint for all the run that's in him. His stove-pipe hat's off and he's firing that pepper-box gun as fast as he can pull the trigger. The gun runs dry and he throws it in the face of a big greasy buck that's coming at him with a war spear, fixing to run him through. Then he reaches back, grabs up his umbrella, and snaps it open.

That done the trick.

What brand of weapon them Lipan warriors thinks he's springing on them, there ain't no telling. Whatever they figure it for, it's something scarey. When that umbrella blooms open, it's the same as a rocket busted among them heathens. They stampede like brush-wild steers at the scent of a lobo wolf. They're yelling and screeching at the tops of their lungs and knocking each other down in their hurry to quit the country.

Big Foot's a man to think quick and take advantage of a situation like that. "Hand it to 'em, boys!" he hollers. And we hand it to 'em.

Ten minutes later, we're picking off the

painted warriors from the sides of the canyon walls where they're trying to climb out. The squaws are huddled in a thicket to one side and their death wails is echoing in the valley. With the help of Mr. Author and his bullet-punched umbrella, we've learnt Smells-Bad-When-He-Walks and his horse thieves a lesson that'll last a long time. We ain't lost a man!

But do we give the little writer gent his dues? Hell, no. He's made us mad, stopping us back yonder when we're dying for water, to find out how we look and feel. He's a little old two-bit greener we've kicked around and there ain't man enough in him to fight when he's cussed. Routing them Injuns is just a run of luck, and we know luck comes to a fool, same as a white man.

That's the way we've got him figured. We're hand-picked Injun-scrapping Texas Rangers, independent as hogs on ice. We don't consider ourselves beholden to nothing nor nobody. We keep right on picking at that little writing gent and hoorawing him till we land back at the settlements with Big Foot's horses and mules.

We're still laughing at him when he quits us back at Santone and rides off with his notebook full of notes for his novel he never publishes. Or if he does, we never see it.

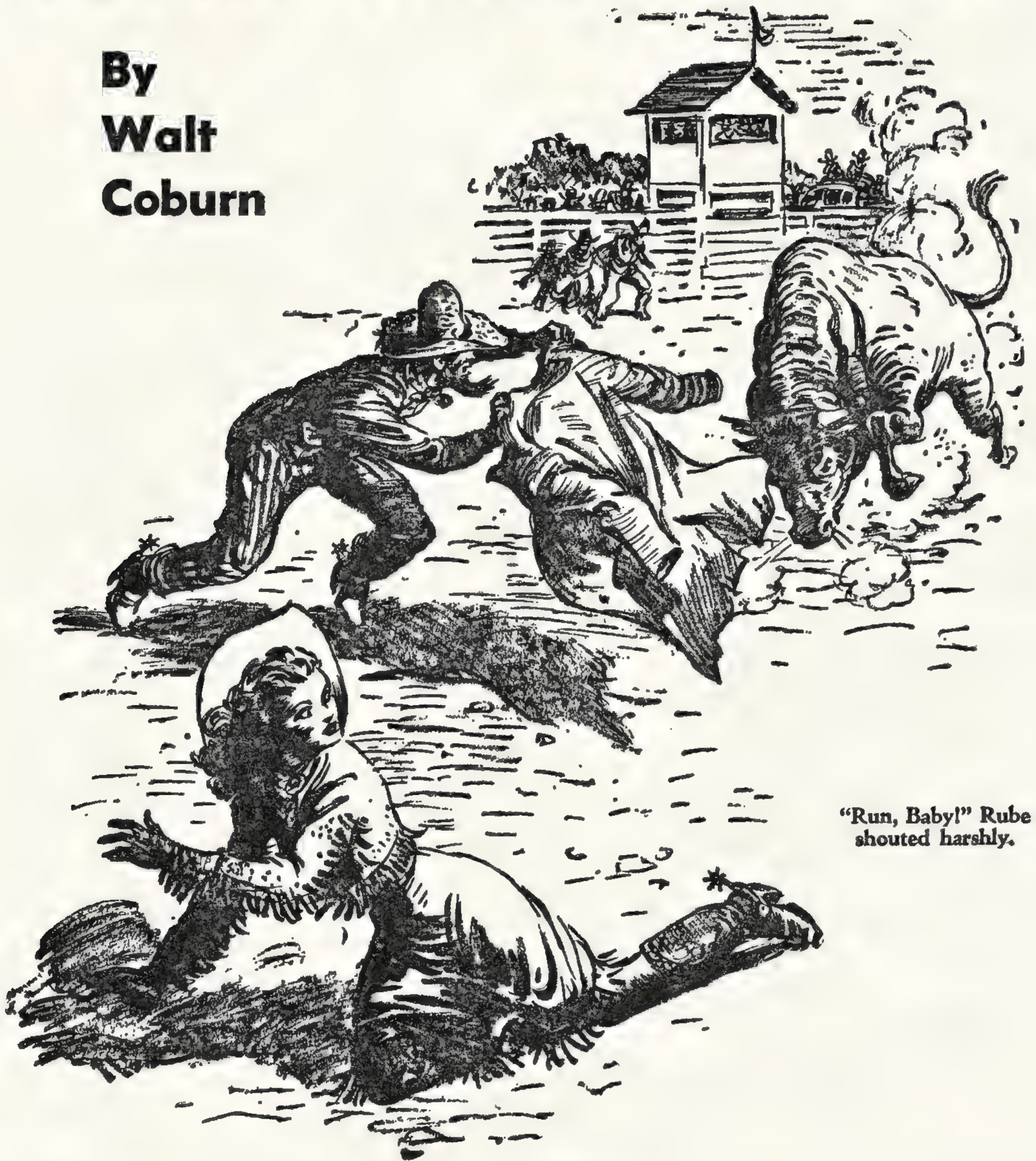
That's how come I make this confess now. A man can't die in any peace with a big wrong like that blackening his soul.

Those Were the Days!

In the days of '49, when in a few years the population of California leaped from 6,000 to some 260,000, five hundred million in gold was unearthed. Eggs sold for \$3.00 each; coffee for \$40.00 a pound; flour for from \$400.00 to \$800.00 a barrel. As for medicine, laudanum was \$1.00 per drop; Seidlitz powders (for your headache!) sold for \$24.00 a box; pills ranged from \$10.00 to \$100.00 each. The lucky prospectors didn't mind, for they had the price. But the unlucky prospectors were stuck, for even "just a little" gold got them practically nothing!

PAYOFF AT POVERTY FLAT

By
Walt
Coburn



"Run, Baby!" Rube
shouted harshly.

At last year's rodeo, they were firm friends. But this year, the sober Rube was punishing a corn likker jug—and the easy-going Pecos Slim was packing a ready six-iron. . . .

THE cow country claimed that the Poverty Flat Jackpot Rodeo was the fastest, roughest, toughest cowboy contest in the world. Its rodeo stock was the saltiest. And every cowboy contestant in the game—from sorry corral hands to present, past and future champions—got to Poverty Flat for its yearly contest.

No prize. The entrance fees for each event were put in jackpot pools. And they

were low enough so that even a forty-a-month cowhand could lay it on the line. Winner take all in each event. No second or third money. Chicken feed compared to the big rodeo money. But the side bets would run anywhere from a 5X Stetson to a trainload of steers.

No fancy bucking chutes and judges' stand—no grandstand or bleachers. Just some big corrals to hold the stock. And the judges and timers did their jobs a-horseback. Spectators were ranch folks and they circled the big alkali flat and watched from their saddles or buckboards and wagons, or squatted on the ground.

No hotel accommodations. Ranchers fetched their own tents and bedrolls and the contestants who hadn't a bed or a bed horse to pack it slept on the ground. Two or three chuck-wagons were camped nearby on feed and water. Grub was free and plenty of it—and a keg of corn likker sat in the brush.

Rube Russell, rodeo clown and cowboy contestant in his own right, traveled with his own camp outfit. He had pitched his tent on every rodeo ground from Salinas, California to Madison Square Garden, from Calgary in Canada to Fort Worth, down in Texas. Rube and his trick roan mule just about topped the list of rodeo clown acts.

Rube had smeared grease-paint on his battered-looking face and glued on his dab of chin whiskers. He had on his striped bib overalls with the cavernous trick pockets he loaded with clown gadgets. A long linen duster and huge hayseed straw hat topped off his costume. He was all alone in his tent. His little Mexican mule, Razzberry, was just outside, eating grain from a nose bag.

Rube Russell took a six-shooter from his old canvas warsack. It was loaded and certainly not a part of his clown paraphernalia. The faint sound of his tent flap lifting whirled him around, the gun in his hand. He must have looked a little ridiculous in his rube outfit, with a six-shooter ready for action. And his puckered blue eyes were ice cold; lips tight and hard under a red, grease-paint grin.

The man who stepped inside and let the tent flap drop behind him was big—over six feet tall, rawboned and with graying reddish hair and sunburned hide. His flannel shirt and cowpuncher pants were loud

in color and pattern. One pant's leg shoved into the fancy stitched top of a high-heeled, shop-made boot. The other leg was gone at the knee and he wore a wooden peg leg. The peg leg was varnished and its leather harness was fancy carved by some saddle maker. He tilted a new, high-crowned hat back on his head and grinned widely.

Rube Russell shoved the gun out of sight into one of his deep pockets. The ice in his blue eyes melted.

"Tinhorn!" There was a huskiness to Rube's voice. He tried not to look at the peg leg.

Tinhorn said, "Long time no see. Last time I recollect seein' you was that evenin' at Fort Worth. Me with a foot hung in the stirrup an' that big Hell-to-Set bronk a-kickin' at my head as he drug me. Then you charged in on that roan mule to pile up that pitchin' bronk an' save my life—while the pick-up men was pullin' up the slack in their guts. Never got to say thanks, Rube. They told me you had some ribs busted an' your face kicked in an' the Razzberry mule crippled."

Tinhorn Jones, last year's World Champion Cowboy, did his best to swagger on his peg leg. He grinned wide and went on:

"This 'un will never git hung up in no stirrup. I got a saddlemaker to fix me a hoodus fer a stirrup to fit 'er. Like an overgrewed leather dice box. Sock the ol' peg in 'er an' nothin' on four laigs kin throw me. Damndest thing, though, Rube. My foot itches sometimes. Like I got chilblains. The foot that ain't there. It's the damndest thing. . . . How's Carmenita?"

"She's all right, I reckon," said Rube stiffly. "If that's likker in that bottle you're packin' on your flank, uncork a drink."

"Since when did you—?" Tinhorn's question died unfinished when he saw the hard glint in the rodeo clown's eyes.

Tinhorn uncorked the nearly full quart of corn likker and handed it to Rube.

"I ketched sight of Pecos Slim as I rode up," Tinhorn tried again. "There was some dude-lookin' folks in a ol' six-horse stagecoach. A shore purty young female forkin' a fancy palomino with a mane an' tail the color of the gal's hair. One of them silver-mounted California rigs. Her an' Pecos Slim with their stirrups a-touchin'. Who—?"

"Yeah." Rube's voice was sharp.

Tinhorn winced as he watched Rube take a big long drink of the potent corn likker. Big Tinhorn Jones felt hurt and sick inside.

TIME was no longer than a year ago when Tinhorn Jones and Rube Russell and Pecos Slim Winters, the best bet now for this year's World Champion Cowboy honors, and Carmenita O'Casey, trick rider and all-around cowgirl, had been pardners. One for all and all for one. Now Tinhorn showed up for the first time since his accident to hold a grand reunion. And the mention of Carmenita or Pecos Slim turned Rube's blue eyes bleak and made the little rodeo clown reach for a whiskey bottle. And who had Rube been expecting when he pulled that gun he was now packing in his bib overalls?

The grease-paint could not hide the scars on the rodeo clown's face. It had taken all the guts in the wide world to do what little Rube Russell had done for Tinhorn Jones a year ago at the big Fort Worth rodeo.

Shod hoofs pounded outside and slid to a halt. There sounded the swish of soft leather, and a girl dressed in silver-embroidered, suede leather Mexican charro outfit burst into the tent. Her tanned face was pale and her smoke-gray eyes dark with some terrific emotion. Her fancy sombrero tumbled off backwards and was held at the back of her shoulders by its buckskin throatlatch. Her tumbled hair was thick and raven black and curly. Carmenita looked Mexican. She was black Irish and nothing but.

Tinhorn grabbed her off her booted feet in a huge bear hug. She gave a startled gasp, then recognized the homely sunburned face. Her arms went around Tinhorn's neck and she kissed him breathlessly and hard, with a choked-back sob. Then he set her back on her feet and grinned down at her now flushed face. From her five feet two height she tilted her curly head to look up at him.

"Gosh, Tinhorn! You look like a million! Ten gallon hat. That shirt. Them pants. A one man sunrise. Them boots— Oh! Tinhorn!"

She had looked down and seen the wooden peg leg. Her face went white as the alkali stretch of Poverty Flat. The big man

pulled her back into his arms and held her until she quit shuddering.

"I got that letter," Tinhorn's big voice was talking to cover up their emotions, "with yours an' Rube's an' Pecos Slim's names signed to it. An' the money. But the hospital bills was all paid. There was a whole slue of fast talkers tryin' to peddle me cork laigs. But I whittled me out this peg an' set into a poker game with the money—"

Somebody else had ridden up and dismounted. Spurs jingled. The tent flap was thrown aside. And Pecos Slim stood there with a gun in his hand.

"All right, you damned shorthorn—"

Then he saw Carmenita and Tinhorn. And shoved the six-shooter back into its fancy holster.

Pecos Slim was a six-footer with wide shoulders and lean flanks and long, hard-muscled legs. His shirt and buckskin foxed pants were of subdued color and tailored to fit him. His boots and hat were the finest money could buy. He had thick mahogany-brown hair and eyes the color of clear amber. One of those eyes was black and swollen to a bloodshot slit.

Tinhorn forced a wide grin and held out a huge hand.

Pecos Slim hesitated a second, then gripped it loosely and let go. "Same ol' Tinhorn!" But his voice was flat as stale beer.

Rube Russell mumbled something about being crowded for air and went out. As he stepped out of the tent he was almost ridden down by the girl on the palomino. She slid her horse to a halt, cut him a quick, searching look, then turned her head to call out in a throaty voice.

"We're waiting lunch for you, Pecos!"

"See you later, Tinhorn," said Pecos Slim, backing out of the tent. He swung aboard his horse and grinned at the girl on the palomino and they rode away together across the flat, headed for the stagecoach.

"Well I'll be damned!" Tinhorn shook his head. "You three bin grazin' on loco weed? You act as friendly as three coiled rattlers. Totin' guns. Rube on the booze. You lookin' scared. Tell gran'paw."

"Let it lay, Tinhorn—don't pick it up," said Carmenita.

"The hell I will!" growled Tinhorn. "The hell I won't!"

"You don't step in between two chargin' bulls, Tinhorn."

"You didn't know I was within a thousand miles of Poverty Flat when you busted in here, young 'un. Chargin' bulls or blazin' six-shooters wasn't slowin' you up none. Now come clean, Baby."

Men and horses drew up outside. "You in there, Tinhorn? The boys have taken a vote. You got elected Arena Boss. Git out here an' start 'er a-rollin'!"

Tinhorn called out to them to tuck in their shirt-tails. That he'd be along directly. And didn't they have better manners than to horn in when he had a purty girl ketched in the bear trap.

Then he was gripping the girl's slim shoulders. His voice dropped to a low growl, his gray-green eyes clouded with worry.

"We all used to be pardners, Baby. Dvidin' the gravy and stickin' together through the tough breaks. It's been over a year since I seen any of yuh. I come a long ways to su'prise the three pardners I cared about. Rube—you know what that li'l ol' son of a gun done for me, that day at Fort Worth. Only for Rube Russell I'd a bin drug an' kicked into big an' little hunks they'd a had to pick up in a basket to bury. I'm just ol' Tinhorn Jones that'd borrow a man's last dollar an' fergit to pay it back. But I'm tied hard an' fast to the three of yuh, an' I don't slip my dally on real friends. An' where does the palomino female on the palomino show-geldin' fit in?"

CARMENITA forced a smile. "She's Jerry Chase. Papa made his few millions from soap or hair tonic or something and then died. She was singin' in a New York night club for the fun and notoriety of it when Pecos Slim won top place at Madison Square Garden. She has a string of palominos that she shows. She's made every rodeo we have. Chase is the name, savvy? She's dickering for the Rancho Grande dude ranch near here. That's her gang in the stagecoach. Every man and gal worth a million. Jerry pitched a big barbecue and dance for us, one and all, last night. Likker flowed like crick water. Rube can't hold his booze like a white man. He hung that shiner on Pecos Slim. The boys had to pull him off Pecos.

They got Rube back here. I slipped away before the ruckus started. Champagne and cavy-air sandwiches don't agree with me. And one of Jerry's playboy amigos plays too rough for a rodeo gal. So there it is, Tinhorn. Just gal trouble between the boys."

"And you kin tell that to Rube's roan mule," said Tinhorn. "Now mebbysso that she-dude kin halter break Pecos Slim as it looks from what I seen and heard. But she couldn't dab no millionaire line on Rube Russell. There's only one girl on earth so far as Rube is concerned. She's standin' right here in your purty number four boots. Now try once more, Baby."

Carmenita O'Casey was trapped. But she wasn't going to be the first one to tell Tinhorn that the bitter trouble between Rube and Pecos Slim began that afternoon more than a year ago at the Fort Worth rodeo. When Pecos Slim had been the pick-up man who had for some reason failed to get there in time to pick Tinhorn off the hurricane deck of that Hell-to-Set bronk after Tinhorn had made the whistle on the bronk for a qualified ride. And when Pecos Slim had hauled Rube out of the mess, the rodeo clown had cussed Pecos Slim for a damned, yellow-bellied coward for not having the guts to do a pick-up rider's chores.

Carmenita could not, would not be the first one to tell Tinhorn Jones the truth—that Rube hadn't spoken to Pecos Slim since that day.

"Come on, you Tinhorn!" shouted somebody outside. "The crowd's a hollerin' for the one an' only notorious Tinhorn Jones."

Carmenita laughed shakily and shoved the big peg-legged Tinhorn out of the tent.

The crowd cheered Tinhorn Jones as he rode out on his famous roping horse Blackjack. His peg leg shoved into its leather socket, his brass-lunged voice, magnified by a large megaphone, sang out:

"Poverty Flat! Where nothin' grows outa the alkali but corral posts. The biggest, pitchin'est bronks that ever come outa Montana an' Wyoming. Longhorn ropin' an' 'doggin' steers, the fastest that ever was fetched outa Chihuahua! Brahmer calves, the puniest'll tip the scale at three hundred, fastern' greased bullets and kin out-dodge a coyote. And the wickedest, orneriest Brahmer stags ever contested. They

was bulls till they was three years old. Wicked as sin. Now hang onto your hats, folks! We turn 'em out wild!"

And the show was on.

It looked like Rube Russell's Day. The little rodeo clown was proving just what Tinhorn Jones and Pecos Slim and Carmenita O'Casey had always claimed. That if he'd quit clowning and work at contesting, Rube was the cinch bet for World Champion Cowboy. And Rube was lapping up the gravy here at Poverty Flat, the proving ground for salty stock and tophand contestants, where more champions were made and un-made than at all the biggest rodeos throughout the world.

Rube won the saddle bronk riding. A close second in the bareback bronk riding. He borrowed Tinhorn's Blackjack horse and made close to world's record time in the calf roping and steer roping. Working on warm corn likker and ice cold anger. A clown grin painted on his face and his eyes as cold blue as winter ice.

Tinhorn used his authority as Rodeo Boss to scratch Rube from the steer riding and bulldogging.

"Not with them ribs of yours, Rube. Give Pecos Slim an' the other boys a chance."

"All Pecos Slim kin do today is buck off an' waste his loops."

But Rube got his Razzberry roan mule and went back to clowning. He had men and women roaring with laughter and the kids squealing with delight. And Carmenita had them staring in goggle-eyed admiration with her trick riding. While Rube and his little roan mule clowned each of her dangerous tricks. And when she somersaulted backwards and her paint trick horse raced on and Carmenita landed on her feet with a spinning loop whirling, Rube slid off the little roan mule's rump and Razzberry kicked him in the seat of his overalls. Rube scrambled to his feet and tangled himself in a length of cotton rope halter shank he attempted to spin.

The eyes of the spectators swiveled from Carmenita, jumping in and out of her spinning loop, to the ludicrous antics of Rube the clown. Their cries of admiration were mingled with belly laughs. And then they saw what neither Rube nor Carmenita saw—and their laughter was suddenly dead.

Tinhorn's brass-lunged voice shouted:

"Look out, Baby! Behind! Rube!"

BUT the charging Brahma stag was moving too fast. That hump shouldered Brahma had just bucked off its rider. A Brahma that has run as a bull for four years and is on the prod is as dangerous as anything on four legs. Its straight spike horns had the points sawed off and brass balls fitted on but one of the brass balls had been knocked off and the tip of that horn splintered to a wicked point.

The Brahma caught the girl from behind and knocked her down—ran over her, and then whirled and charged her again. Rube whipped off his long linen duster and got there with the speed of a foot racer. Using the old linen duster as a bull-fighter in the bull ring uses his red cape, Rube went in close. He flagged the Brahma away from the girl on the ground with all the skillful timing of a bull fighter.

"Run, Baby!" Ruby shouted harshly. "Run, damnit, run!"

Carmenita was dazed and bruised. Blood and dirt smeared her handsome leather charro suit. She got to her feet and fell again. Her ankle was sprained.

The Brahma bull was a killer now. Rube worked in closer with his torn duster. The fighting hump-shouldered stag hooked aside the duster and charged the man. Rube went down in a heavy swirl of dust. But he was up again and on his feet and waving his big straw hat to flag the charging stag into rushing him again. He tried to sidestep but the big Brahma caught him with that splintered horn and knocked him down—and then pivoted on its front legs to hook Rube as he lay there.

From the start it had been Pecos Slim's hard luck day. He'd bucked off. He'd missed every throw he'd made. He was standing on the ground talking to Jerry Chase when the Brahma charged Carmenita. Pecos Slim moved fast now. He grabbed Jerry Chase and swung her from her saddle and vaulted aboard the palomino, quickly spurred the horse to a dead run.

Tinhorn had started from the far end of the long, wide flat. His Blackjack steeldust gelding wide open. But the palomino had wings and a head start.

Pecos Slim headed the palomino straight

for the fighting Brahma. His teeth were bared in a flat-lipped grin. And when he got there he quit the saddle without bothering to check the palomino's running speed. He leaned sideways and down and when his two hands gripped the Brahma's horns. The terrific momentum swung Pecos Slim over those humped shoulders and under the stag's neck with a force that yanked his arms in their shoulder sockets. The one hundred and ninety pounds of Pecos Slim's tough body swung its weight with a heavy swift momentum from the Brahma's horns to twist the head up and around. The Brahma stag went to its knees, somersaulted and went over on top of Pecos Slim.

The heavy white dust boiled up in a cloud and somewhere hidden in it were two men and a fighting Brahma stag. Rube Russell was only partly conscious. Pecos Slim squinted his eyes shut and gritted his teeth and held on as the heavy weight of the Brahma crushed the wind out of him.

Tinhorn got there as fast as the sweaty steeldust roping horse could get him there. He swung a loop that dipped down into that swirling dust cloud and picked up both the Brahma's hind legs in its noose. Then Tin-

horn and his Blackjack horse swung off at a sharp angle and dragged the big, bawling, Brahma clear of the two men. A cow-puncher head-roped the stag.

Tinhorn was off his horse with a hogging string in his hand and had the stag's hind legs tied together below the hocks. Then he hopped over on his peg leg to where the white dust cloud was drifting and thinning.

SOMEHOW Carmenita had crawled there and had Rube's head pillowed in her lap, trying to wipe the dirt and blood from the rodeo clown's face.

"You darned Rube!" She kissed him hard.

"Pecos—" Rube's voice was husky. "Pony Express Slim—carried the mail—tell him, Baby—that I'm a damned liar. That day at Fort Worth when I thought he was yellow—they told me at the hospital that Pecos was at the chutes saddlin' his bronk for the next ride. Another feller takin' his place fer pick-up man. I tried to tell him, later, when I got out of the hospital. But he was too damn prideful to listen. Well he just got even. And listen, Baby—don't kiss me no more, unless you actually mean it fer keeps—"

It's the patented filter with its 66 mesh-screen baffles, that whirlcools the smoke—retains flakes and slugs—absorbs moisture—minimizes raw mouth and tongue bite. When filter is discolored, it has done its job. Discard it and put in a fresh one—costs only ONE CENT. Enjoy the benefits of Frank Medico Pipe, Cigarette and Cigar Holders.



\$1 WITH BOX OF FILTERS FREE!

REMOVABLE FILTER IS THE HEART OF MEDICO FILTERED SMOKING

ABSORBENT FILTERS for Frank MEDICO

GENUINE FILTERS FOR MEDICO

PACKED ONLY IN THIS RED & BLACK BOX

PAT'D SAFETY SCREEN INTERIOR WITH "CELLOPHANE" EXTERIOR

10 for \$0.1

X-RAY VIEW

Carmenita's red mouth crushed hard against his paint-smeared grin. And then Rube was talking again:

"I thought always it was Pecos, especially after that Hell-to-Set bronk had busted my face. That's why I jumped Pecos Slim last night. Told 'im I'd kill 'im before I'd let 'im marry Jerry Chase. Because you loved 'im. And he'd marry you or I'd gut shoot 'im—"

"You darned, boneheaded Rube! If you weren't so bunged up, I'd haul off and—"

"Gosh, Baby, your face is bleedin'! You're hurt. Nothin' wrong with me but my wind knocked out. Git a doctor!"

For the first time Rube and Carmenita took their eyes from each other's. And they both tried to grin it off when they saw Pecos Slim standing there hatless and dirt smeared, grinning down at them. And beside him stood big Tinhorn with his arm around Pecos Slim's shoulders, a wide, wide grin on his sunburned face.

"Shameless, ain't it," chuckled Pecos Slim, "the way some couples will carry on in public! Huggin' an' a-kissin' with all of Poverty Flat a-watchin'!"

"Scan'lous," nodded Tinhorn. "Plumb disgraceful."

Then Tinhorn Jones stooped and picked up a couple of six-shooters from the heavy dust. Rube's gun that had dropped out of his bib overalls pocket and the ivory-handled six-shooter that had been jolted out of Pecos Slim's holster.

"The boys got mad an' throwed 'em away, Baby." He shoved both guns into the waistband of his loud-checked pants. "Mebby I kin hock 'em."

"If you three idiots don't quit calling me Baby, I'll—"

"Bridget, then." Tinhorn grinned. "Bridget Carmenita O'Casey. And won't that look shore glamorous on the rodeo programs!"

"Is it all right," sounded the throaty voice of Jerry Chase, "if I butt in just long enough to look Pecos over for cuts, bruises and busted bones? After all, I'm married to the guy."

"Married?" gasped Carmenita. "Gosh! I'm glad, Jerry! And Pecos Slim is a Champ! More ways than cowboy contesting. Me that's sistered him all these years should know." She tried to stand up but her twisted ankle gave way and

Rube stood up and helped her onto her one good leg and held her.

Rube shoved his free hand at Pecos Slim and they shook and cussed one another. Jerry and Carmenita had their arms around each other. Then Rube had to kiss Jerry, and Pecos Slim had to kiss Carmenita. Then both girls ganged up on Tinhorn. And he had a girl in each big arm when the doctor came trotting up with his little black bag.

Tinhorn said, "There's nothin' wrong with Rube an' Pecos Slim, Doc, that soap an' water an' a shot of corn likker won't cure. But the Baby twisted an ankle. It won't be the first time I've packed 'er this-away. She was about three years old the first time." And Tinhorn picked her up and swaggered, really swaggered off on his peg leg. He carried her towards Rube Russell's tent.

"Yeah," he grinned at Jerry Chase, "and I've loped around with you on my back too. Set you on your first pony."

"I wondered," Jerry Chase's laugh was throaty, "if you'd remember."

"Your daddy was the best damn' vet in Texas. Doc Chase. Used nothin' but his own medicines he made hisself. Doc Chase's Distemper Cure. Doc Chase's Spavin an' Gall Cure. Doc Chase's Liniment. Fer Man or Beast. Alcohol forty percent. But it was the damndest tustin' stuff I ever swallowed. Made a million before he died. But it never give 'im Stetson fever. Played a sweet game of poker in the saddle room of a livery barn. . . ."

"The million," Jerry smiled, tears misting her gray eyes, "went. I was singing in a night club to pay the feed bill on my string of palominos when I met Pecos Slim. We got married and kept it a secret. We're buying the Rancho Grande dude ranch. A dollar down and we'll work the balance out together."

Tinhorn told Rube and Carmenita to pull up the slack in their jaws and grinned at Pecos Slim and said for them all to hang onto their hats.

"You four ain't the only ones that's teamed up. I married my nurse. She's got red hair an' a disposition to match it. Allows me a hunderd bucks a month fer to gamble. No more, no less. I left her home at the ranch. Somebody had to stay there to run the layout."

"Our ranch. Yours, Rube, an' the Baby's, an' Pecos Slim's. An' it's big enough, gosh knows, to deal in Jerry. Just fergit this Rancho Grande thing. I could lose it in our lower pasture."

"Whoa, there, Tinhorn!" Rube shook his head. "That Poverty Flat likker's got yuh!"

"You three recollect that money you sent me to buy a cork laig? Well I set into a little Fort Worth poker game with it. When I pushed back my chair I had the papers to a Texas ranch. And when I looked the land over I told myself I'd got slickered. Land as bare an' bald as this Poverty Flat. I felt kinda cheap when I got back to Fort Worth. And when a couple of dudes asked could they go wildcattin' on my land I told 'em they was welcome to all the wildcats they could shoot on that alkali flat.

"And I'd plumb fergot about 'em a couple of months later when they located me in the saddle shop where I was gittin' this harness fastened on the peg leg I'd whittled. And I figgered they was shore loco drunk when they told me I could start coundin' my millions. That they'd shot a dozen wildcats. And each one was producun some hundred barrels a day. And that was the first time I knew that they'd bin talkin' about wildcat OIL WELLS."

"Oil wells!"

"Yeah. Big 'uns, boys an' girls. And it was your cork laig money that staked me in the poker game. All papers is drawed up an' made out. I fetched 'em fer you three pardners to sign. That's all there is to it. The oil fellers git their cut. We'll wait till

after the weddin' so's Rube an' the Baby kin sign Mister and Missus Rube Russell along with Mister an' Missus Pecos Slim Winters an' Mister an' Missus Tinhorn Jones."

Tinhorn shoved a bulky brown manila envelope at Jerry and told her to ride herd on it. That it held the papers they all had to sign. Then he swung aboard his horse and rode back out with his big megaphone.

"Ladies an' gents an' young 'uns!" Tinhorn's voice sounded loud and jubilant, "excuse the delay. But I reckon you all will be glad to know that barrin' Carmenita's twisted ankle and Rube a-losin' his chin whiskers, nobody got hurt. And you are hereby invited, one and all, to the big blowout tonight at Rancho Grande. It's a weddin', folks! The World's Champeen Cowgirl Carmenita O'Casey is marryin' the World's Greatest rodeo clown an' cowboy contestant, Rube Russell!"

The crowd yelled and cheered and over at Rube Russell's tent the little trick mule brayed. Rube poured grain in the nosebag and hung it on Razzberry's long ears.

"Now for the last and wildest event on the program!" bellowed Tinhorn. "The wild bronk race. Hang onto your hats! All right, boys! Let's go! We turn 'em out wild at Poverty Flat!"

Then Tinhorn tossed away the megaphone and loped back to the pardners he'd left at Rube Russell's tent. His peg leg shining in the setting sun. Perhaps it was the alkali dust that made his eyes water so that he blinked. Because his grin was wide across his homely sunburned face.

Way of A Cowboy

The soldier will give parting salute to one of his buddies with a rifle volley over the grave. The seaman will shroud his shipmate in the Colors and with a few words from the Bible give him to the sea. The cowboy who died and was buried on the range received simple but eloquent tribute from the friends he left behind. At his grave his horse was unsaddled from the wrong side, acknowledgement that as riders none of his mourners was his equal.

GUN GHOSTS CAN'T DIE!

By
LEE FLOREN

They fought silently for the gun.



When the ghost of a gun-blasted past caught up with Jim Lincoln, Jim knew he was too much of a man to look back—but not man enough to face the future!

SOMEDAY a ghost would ride into Beaverton—and the past would become alive . . . the future would cease to be. Now that day had come, and that ghost was riding down Beaverton's main-street.

Jim Lincoln saw that ghost and laid down his sewing-awl. He got to his feet, a tall man, gaunt but not stooped. His face was

thin and held a hidden strength. He stood there and inside he was numb.

This newcomer—this ghost—was tall, too. His face was sharp, shrunken. His lips lay tightly across his pointed jaw. His eyes, sunken and heavy under hanging brows, swept up and down the street, and missed nothing. They came to the sign over Jim Lincoln's saddle-shop. They rested there.

The newcomer dismounted. His gunbelt was sagging low. He tugged it up, the single .45 riding well forward against his flat thigh. His boots pounded across the plank walk. He entered and closed the door behind him.

There was a short silence. Two men stood there—tall men, both. There was savage elation and anger in the blood of one; the other was held by a sort of sorrow, and the ashes of success were dry behind his lips.

Then the man said, "Howdy, Jim Hobson."

"Not Hobson," said Jim Lincoln. "The name is Lincoln, fellow."

"Get off your highhorse, Jim."

"I don't follow you, stranger."

The man laughed. His mouth opened but on sound came. "*Stranger; huh. . .* So you don't know me, Jim Hobson?"

There was no use. Jim Lincoln's bony shoulders sagged. He said quietly, "How and when did you get out of the Utah penitentiary, Mattson?"

"Bought my way out—with .45 slugs."

"And you left a trail of blood behind you," said Jim Lincoln. "And how did you know I was in Montana, in Beaverton?"

"Down in Wyomin' I saw a saddle that had an engraved silver horn. The engraving was an odd design, like that you put on that center-fire rig you used to own. I got curious and looked at the stamp on it. It said, Jim Lincoln, Beaverton, Montana. I been askin' a few questions aroun' this section. Seems as though you are married to a big cowman's daughter an' you made a good sum of money." Mattson looked at Jim Lincoln's thighs. "Why don't you pack your guns?"

"I never want to have to use a gun again, Mattson." He added, "How much money do you want?"

"Money!" said Mattson, huskily. "Money! Money doesn't pay me for those years

I spent behin'—" Mattson struck savagely.

The quick unexpected blow knocked Jim Lincoln backwards. The showcase stopped him; glass broke. Anger played in him. He held it and said, "Mattson, don't—"

Mattson came forward, his fists up. His eyes were small, mean; his lips steady. His left came out and Jim Lincoln ducked. Then the right darted in and smashed against Jim Lincoln's forehead. The showcase held him.

"Fight!" said Mattson. "Fight, you—!"

Jim Lincoln was moving forward, then. There was coldness inside and yet there was fire. All this was moving to the surface now, flowing and ebbing; there was a relief, too—he had held this, it had lain in him, for six years. Now those voices inside were momentarily silenced, faced by the stress, and strain, of physical action.

He straightened Mattson, and the man grunted. This rang against Jim Lincoln's ears, and then Mattson struck and missed. And Jim Lincoln went forward. Mattson walked flatly into the blow; his muscles drooped. Jim Lincoln saw this, and his blood moved swiftly.

Mattson was hurt; he would hang on. Jim Lincoln started to move back, but the showcase held him. Mattson gathered himself, lunged; they went down. They rolled and fought, tipping saddle-racks. Mattson had his confidence again—his muscles were hard, and smooth.

Jim Lincoln heeled his palm upward but Mattson pulled his jaw down, and Lincoln's hand slipped, moving across Mattson's thin nose. His right knee came up and into Mattson's belly. Mattson rolled over. He had his gun out, now.

THEY fought, then, for the gun. Then Mattson had the hammer back; Lincoln put his thumb under it. The descending prong moved solidly into his flesh and he felt the pain. They rolled twice, and the gun was against Mattson's high ribs.

The report was dull, lifeless. Mattson moved against him; his muscles went soft, pliant. Then he lay there, dark and long and dying against destruction.

He said quietly, "Jim, you've—"

The voice inside Jim Lincoln were screeching; he silenced them, they arose again. You can kill him, they screamed;

kill him before he talks. And the thumb moved back with the hammer.

Mattson said, "You can't do that, Jim."

Jim Lincoln lowered the gun. "No," he said. And the voices subsided.

There was a crowd now and Ab Jenson said, "What's this all about, Jim?" He was a short man, a just man, but he wore his authority too heavily.

Mattson's eyes were on Jim Lincoln. They were tired. He said in that same low voice, "He ain't Jim Lincoln, marshal. You've heard of Jim Hobson, ain't you? Well, there he stands, now."

"Who are you?" asked Ab Jenson.

"Link Mattson."

Ab Jenson asked, "The man Jim Hobson shot through the back—the gunman—in Lusk, Wyomin'? Ten years or so ago. . . . But Link Mattson went to the pen in Utah. He's there yet."

"He was there," corrected Link Mattson.

Ab Jenson looked at Jim Lincoln. His eyes were bright, sharp, birdlike. "That right, Jim?"

Jim Lincoln nodded.

Mattson smiled and closed his eyes.

Ab Jenson said, "Now clear out of here, the whole bunch of you. Charlie, you hurry down the street and get Doc."

"Here comes Doc now, Ab."

The reluctant townspeople trickled out the door, and sound rippled across them. Jim Lincoln felt the edge of this sound, and it was sharp against him. The medico made his examination.

"He might live and he might die. There's a stretcher in my office, Charlie."

Charlie left and came back and they moved Mattson onto the canvas. Mattson's eyes were heavy, they were closed; his breathing was death, and quiet. Then they were gone, and Jim Lincoln was alone with Ab Jenson.

"By heaven," said Ab Jenson, "This is too bad, Jim."

"Yes."

"Hank Carson will be glad to hear who you really are, Jim. He has been lookin' for a way to open trouble with you for a long time." Ab Jenson shook his head. His mind had narrow borders; this rubbed against them. "You're my friend, Jim."

"Thanks, Ab."

Ab Jenson left then and Jim Lincoln stood there, straight and tall. Shadows

grouped themselves in his brain; they grew, they took form. He heard the backdoor open and he turned suddenly. It was Cathy.

She said wearily, "Well, they know now, Jim."

He held her by the shoulders. Her hair was dark, her face was dark; she was soft, she was fire. They had been married five years and she had held this secret—now the secret had been released but her tension was still there. She was calm, as usual, but her calmness was forced, now.

Finally he said, "Well, Cathy?"

"What are we going to do, Jim?"

He dropped his hands and walked to the window. People were moving upon the street, but they were indistinct and distant. Only the thoughts were clear now; they were grouped. They moved across the screen of his mind as they had moved a million times before—and the picture was the same. Now he translated it into words.

"I was fast with a gun, Cathy, and I was young and reckless. They hired me to bring the law into their towns and I killed men. I moved against the toughest of them and they died, not I. Then came Link Mattson who said he would kill me."

"Jim. Please. That hurts."

"Mattson was drinking at the bar when I came in. He saw me in the mirror; he half-turned, his gun rising. I was fast that day, too fast. For my gun came out and I shot him in the back before he could clear leather."

"And then people talked?"

"Yes," he said, "they talked."

Mattson had lain sick for weeks. Then an old charge had been brought against him and he stood trial. From the witness-stand, he had said he had not been reaching for his gun. And he had lied with fervor.

For people were looking at Jim Lincoln now: they were colder, less friendly. Time and tongues were working on emotions. But they had not asked him to move on. He had made that choice himself. Other towns were to know the trod of his boots, the hunger of his heart. But always his unsavory reputation had traveled ahead. At last he saw the futility. . . .

Cathy asked, "What are we going to do, Jim?"

He said slowly, "I don't know, Cathy."

He wanted to be alone, he wanted to fight

this through by himself, he wanted to find his own solution. She knew him and she saw this.

"When you want me, Jim," she said, "I'll be home." She left.

BUT the thoughts moved in him, and they were bitter. He straightened his shop as best he could, and he stood silently looking at the blood. He got the mop and bucket from the back room and mopped that section of the floor. That part was cleaner now than the rest of the floor, and it stood out. It seemed to regard him with a dull, stupid air and he found himself smiling. His mind was too busy; it was filling itself with trivialities.

He could do nothing with the broken showcase. Later he would get some glass from the county seat and repair it, if he stayed. If he stayed! What should he do? Stay, or leave?

He threaded his Myers sewing awl, then laid it on his work-bench. He could not work. He was glad, suddenly, that Cathy had left him alone. He had seen the troubles behind her eyes—but she had given him the choice of making their decision, and for that he was thankful. Other women might have tried to influence him, they might have wept softly; they might have been stony and hard, forceful and strong.

Between them this bond of understanding had grown. Now it was strong and deep. She had her problem, too, for even now people were thinking of her in a new light, in a new fashion.

The doctor entered and said, "Mattson is wounded bad but he should live, Jim." He did not wait for an answer. "Hank Carson and two of his hands are in the Mint. According to Carl Jamison, they are talking against you."

"Jamison talks too much."

"They're strong," said the doctor. "They're mean."

Jim Lincoln said, "Yes. But they're not my big problem, doc. The problem is what people think and," he added, "myself."

"People are always the same, Jim. They have always known greed and avarice. They lie, they steal, they kill, but there is something good in each one. They were the same at the tower of Babel, the fall of Rome, at Antietam, at Bull Run. No man, because he is a man, can tell what they will

think, how they will act, what they will do. For they do not know themselves. Maybe they are doomed as a race; maybe they are not."

"You're a pessimist, doc."

"Maybe so, Jim. I hope you're right. Well, I got to get across town to see Mrs. White."

After the doctor had gone, Jim moved out upon the street, moving toward the Steer Horn cafe. Hank Carson and Stratton and Maloney were in front of the drug-store; he had to pass them. They stepped out—they stood across the sidewalk, and they waited.

They were big men physically, these three. There was power, there was ruthlessness, in them. Jim Lincoln was aware of this, the thought registered, then fell back. Carson's face was heavy, with firm jewels. Stratton's whiskery face was a thin, motionless slab against the day. Maloney's eyes, as usual, were dead, lifeless. No emotion, no feeling, moved across their depths.

Jim Lincoln said, "Get out of my way."

Carson said cynically, "Now, wouldn't that be just too nice. Well, Lincoln, it caught up with you. What about it, men?"

"He ain't much," said Stratton.

Maloney was silent. Jim Lincoln experienced the feeling, suddenly, that Maloney was no part of this—this was not his style.

Jim Lincoln repeated, "Get out of my way."

Carson was a poor judge of character, and he showed that now. He grabbed the front of Jim Lincoln's shirt. The shirt ripped and Jim Lincoln struck. He hit Carson twice, and hit him hard. Carson went backwards, but he did not release his grip. He tore out part of the shirt and went back against the building, holding the cloth in his balled fist.

He said quietly, "You had better get your guns, Jim Lincoln."

Jim Lincoln glanced at Stratton. He read something in Stratton's eyes: was it fear? Maloney's eyes still held no life. The pause grew, built up, and Jim Lincoln broke it. He said, "You'll make me kill you, Carson."

Carson said, "I don't die easy."

"Maybe," said Jim Lincoln, "we'll see about that, Carson."

He went down the street then, with these thoughts inside of him. He took a seat at the Steer Horn counter. The waitress was a dark-haired girl with a wild rose in her hair.

He said, "That's pretty, Mary."

"I picked it this afternoon. Wes and I were fishing in Beaver Creek. We caught a catfish and two pike. Big fellows." She measured with her hands.

She had been a thin girl when he had seen her first, now she was a woman. Somehow, it affected him greatly. He rolled this in his mind and sought the solution. Then he understood: he was a part of this town, she was a part of it too, her days had been close to his, and he had watched her grow.

He found satisfaction in this, and he also found an irritation. He ate slowly, shoved his plate back, and laid fifty cents beside it. The restaurant seemed too small, he wanted wider spaces.

He stood outside; he would not go to his shop. Of course there would be solace and satisfaction among old familiar things, but now he wanted freedom. He walked to the edge of Beaverton.

THE town was set on a high plateau, and he looked to the south and west. Ahead stretched the green grasslands, the irrigated bottomlands with their red and gold and crimson; land irrigated by the dam higher back in the hills. The leaves were green and clinging to the cottonwood trees, the willows bent under the slight Montana wind. Beaver Creek was a twisting ribbon of gray, curving through the meadows.

He lifted his eyes from this, allowing his sight to run to the south. There the hills gently lifted from the basin, growing and growing in the distance. They were brown and barren, and rocks cluttered their gravelly sides. And beyond the hills, lifting high and clean into the day, were the distant peaks of the Little Rockies, pointed and dull against the distance and space.

He let his eyes rest then. These mountains—cold and dim and aloof—never failed to move some inner chord. They were like giants, like men without bodies—they sat and watched, and spoke not. They had

been there for centuries, and they would be there until the last man had ridden, or walked, across their bases.

Time passed, and he turned to earthly problems. Below him, winding like a heavy snake along the hills, ran the dirty canal filled with the dirty water that brought life, that brought greenness, to the meadows below. This canal was, he saw, the basis of all strife: because of it, Hank Carson had turned against him.

For he, Jim Lincoln, through hard work and promotion, had brought this canal into this land. He had raised the money and financed it. Settlers had moved in upon what was once only grazing-land, and Hank Carson had lost his ranges. Now Carson clung to the edges of the hills, running his cattle in the rougher country. And in Carson's heart had arisen a great hate.

The doctor came up and said, "I been looking for you, Jim. I guess I'm no judge, a man might say. You see, Link Mattson is dead. He died about twenty minutes ago."

"I see."

"I guess it's for the best, Jim. If he had lived he would have gone back and probably been hanged. Yes, I guess it's for the best. There's something wrong with this world, Jim. Something wrong with man."

Jim smiled. "It's been that way from the beginning, doc."

"Yes," the man of medicine said, "and it will never change." He looked at Jim Lincoln, his eyes bird-sharp. "John Selman shot John Wesley Hardin through the head. You remember that, don't you?"

"I do."

"John Wesley Hardin was a tough gunman, and Selman said he had drawn his gun, and Selman killed for self-defense. Jim, for the Lord's sake, don't break Cathy's heart. She's proud, she's fine—"

Jim said, "Adios, doc."

The doctor said quietly, "Pardon me, Jim," and left.

Maloney came up on a big bay gelding. He had a bed-roll tied behind his saddle, his rifle rode in its boot, he was ready for the trail. He said, "I was headin' by this way, Jim Lincoln, an' I saw you standin' here. Thought I'd drop over an' say good-by."

Jim Lincoln watched him, and wondered. The man's eyes, as usual, were lifeless. Nothing moved on their surfaces.

"Where are you going?"

Maloney waved a big hand across space. "See them blue hills south of here? The Larb hills? Look how they lay back against those clouds. They're blue, and they're gray, an' they shimmer in the distance. I wonder what's in those hills, who lives there, what the sun looks like in that high atmosphere." His eyes showed something now. "You see, Jim, I don't want to die. I ain't got a woman or a kinkfolk, but I still like the pure clean air. Land is land and man is man, but why should man fight about land? God knows, there's plenty of it—enough for all." He turned his bay suddenly. "So long, fella."

He was loping down the lane then, following the dusty wagon road, the thin dust rising behind his horse's hoofs. He rode tall in his leather, whirling the loose end of his tied catch-rope, and he was singing in a deep voice. Jim Lincoln watched him recede into distance, watched him grow smaller and smaller until, at last, the hills and the encroaching darkness took him from his view.

There were two of them left now, Carson and Stratton. Jim Lincoln thought of that, appreciating the fact that the odds were thinned. They drifted across his inner vision: Stratton, who hired his gun out for wages because he wanted to feed his ego, wanted people to know that he, Stratton, was a hired gun-hand. Stratton, in his limited knowledge, had not seen the end of that trail—had not seen the day when he would lie, broken and beaten by bullets, on some floor or on some sidewalk or on some street, gasping his life away. Or, if he had vision to see that day, he did not have intelligence to thoroughly understand it.

But Carson was of a different substance, he was made of stronger material. Yet, in his way, he was ignorant. Jim Lincoln knew that. Carson was bull-headed; he was strong; he was arrogant. And, under this, ran the sullen strength of pride, ill-based through that pride was.

The dusk had changed, now. The blanket of night had settled, and darkness was over this section. He thought of Maloney out there in the dark, riding away from death and gunflame and destruction. Maloney was no coward, he knew; Maloney was smart, he wanted his life, he wanted to breathe clean air.

STILL, when a man once runs, he must keep on running. Jim Lincoln knew this; the irony, the bitterness, seeped into him. He and Maloney were of a different cast. Maloney was a tumbleweed moving before the wind—he was a roamer, a drifter. When the wind blew, he went before it; when the wind settled, he settled too. He had no ties, and he wanted none, and he would never have them.

But he, Jim Lincoln, had built up these ties; now they held him to the earth, to this town. Cathy's father and mother, pioneers both, lived back in those hills. Could he take her from them and drift before the wind?

Kerosene lights burned in buildings now, their yellow glows looking like squares of strength against the silken blackness. Behind these moved men and women and children; they were at home, the rest of the world was miles away. Cathy was waiting, he knew; but still he did not turn toward her.

He turned into the night, walking along the big bank of the canal, listening to the surge and ebb of the waters. He walked for miles, untiring and strong, and then he turned toward home. The night was still save for the sound of his boots and the croak of a bullfrog hidden in the rushes.

The night light glowed in the drugstore, its light showing the face of the clock. He saw, with a slight shock, that it was almost midnight. Most of the town's lights had been extinguished, but the big lantern hanging over the livery-barn door was still aglow.

The three men situated there did not see him because he was beyond the lantern's cone of light. He stood beside a building and watched them. Two of them leaned against the building beside the door, the third squatted on his haunches. They had a quart bottle and the man who squatted was drinking.

He was Shep Miller, a graybearded old man, friend to any man with a bottle. The others, the two leaning, were Carson and Stratton. Jim Lincoln watched them and inside of him something grew. He held no hate, no antipathy, toward them. Rather, inside, he had a pity.

He had seen their kind before; they were not worthy of hate. They were not strong, they were weak; they thought themselves

strong, and therein lay their weakness. But he put these thoughts aside, and went home.

Cathy had left the light on in the living room. She was in bed by now, but she had waited, he knew. He climbed the stairs silently and entered her room. The lamp beside her bed was turned low. She had been reading and now the magazine had fallen to the floor.

The night held a touch of chill, and the blanket was tight across her shoulders. She lay on her side, asleep, her body moving to her rhythmic breathing. Her left arm was drawn under her head, and her hair covered her elbow. Fatigue and unrest had left her, and she slept.

He thought then, "This is her room and her home. I built it for her and—" Then those thoughts became too big and he could not hold them. He turned, then, and went into his room.

He did not light a lamp. The place was familiar to him because of long occupancy, and he stepped wide of the chair as he went to his desk. He opened the second drawer first. He became aware of his mistake then, and he closed it softly, not wanting to awaken Cathy. The third drawer held his guns.

The leather belts brushed as he lifted the Colts from the drawer. He lifted them clear, closed the drawer, and then tiptoed down the hall. When he passed Cathy's door she still slept. He glanced in momentarily, noting the scene again, and then as silently he went down the stairs.

He stopped before the living-room light, and examined the guns. They were black and heavy and they reflected no light. The oil lay thin upon them and he brushed it off against his pant leg, restoring them again to holsters. They were loaded, he knew; he had done some practice shooting out in the sagebrush the week before.

The leather was soft and pliable, it fitted the curve of his hips. He tied the holsters against his thighs, the buckskin thongs pulling into his fingers as he laced them tightly. Then he moved again into the street, the weight heavy upon him.

Now the livery-barn was ahead; now he saw the three. He moved into the lantern's rim of light, and they saw him. Old Shep Miller got to his feet, moving with an

alacrity alien to his many years. He tried to say something but his lips only quivered; the words would not come. He halted once at the corner of the building, his eyes wide as he took in the scene, then he bolted and the sound of his boots came back to Jim Lincoln.

Stratton had leaned forward, and his eyes were vague. This had come too unexpectedly, his slow brain could not digest it. But Carson had spread his legs wide, and his heavy jewels were suffused with blood.

He said in a low voice, "So this is the way things stand, huh, Jim Lincoln?"

It was not a question. It was a statement. But Jim Lincoln said, "Yes."

"You could run, Jim Lincoln."

"I don't think so, Carson."

The wind was moaning through the eaves. That was the only sound until the guns lifted and roared. Then that sound became lost in the heaviness of gunfire.

Stratton's gun was out. It was talking, it was winking, it was red. Desperation and fear were with Stratton, and they flung his bullets wide. Then something, moving out of the dark, hit him hard in the ribs. It pounded through him and he died.

Jim Lincoln's shirt jerked suddenly, and impact made him turn. He fell to one knee, and moved his guns around. He wondered, vaguely, why he was so slow and yet, all the time, he knew his muscles were responding quickly, that his shots were a muffled roar, so evenly were they spaced.

Now Carson had dropped his guns, now he leaned straight against the building, his empty hands hanging. Jim Lincoln did not get to his feet. He knelt there, the voices silent inside, that pain hanging across his heart, and he watched Carson die. And then, townspeople came running.

"Help me to my feet, doc," he said.

He was walking down the street then, the medico holding him and saying, "Jim, you did it, man. Jim, you—"

"Please, doc," he said.

There was silence then, and there was pain. He must have drifted off because soon he was in the doctor's office, lying on the cot, and his shirt was off. And Cathy was beside him, smiling through the tears. She was saying, "Jim, oh, Jim, why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you—"

He said softly, "Hush, Cathy, hush . . ."

Go Slick with ARGOSY!

You'll like the new ARGOSY. In its larger size and attractive new format, it has brought together the leading writers of America. Here you'll find entertainment that will carry you out of the troubled world, dashing adventure, sparkling romance—and top flight features and enlightening articles on various far-reaching problems of today and tomorrow—all written by authors who are outstanding in their fields. Here are a few of the thirty-odd stories and features:

Fiction

Headline Hunter
by C. P. DONNEL, JR.

Gold Cups Are For Gentlemen
by BORDEN CHASE

Escape
by WILL F. JENKINS

Ed Quenches An Old Flame
by WALTER BROOKS

Double Exposure
by JOSEPH MARSHALL

Strictly Plutonic
by EVERETT and OLGA WEBBER

Hero's Privilege
by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

Articles and Features

What About Russia?
by LELAND STOWE

Secret Weapons
by MAJOR GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

There Need Be No Depression
by LEO CHERNE

Women Need Love Education
by WILLIAM MOULTON MARSTON

If Jesus Returned Today
by DAVID SEABURY

Air War in Swing Time
by BILL DAVIDSON

Other writers represented in the big May issue, on sale April 7th, include Leslie T. White, Kathleen Norris, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, George Armin Shaftel, George W. Campbell, Charles E. Parkinson, Anita Block, and many others.

**NEW SUBSCRIBERS—SEND IN THE FORM BELOW AND
GET ARGOSY AT OUR SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY RATE**

To: ARGOSY Circulation Dept.,
205 East 42nd Street
New York, 17, N. Y.

ENTER my subscription for ARGOSY to start with the first possible issue.

☐ I will remit when you send a bill.

☐ I enclose check or money order.

☐ 14 Issues—\$3.00

☐ Two years—\$5.50

☐ Three years—\$8.00

(Add \$1.00 per year for all foreign countries that are not members of the Pan American Postal Union).

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

108-5

ONE AGAINST THE



*Gripping Novelette of
a Lone Texan's Last
Stand*



Jeff Carson didn't mind the Triangle Syndicate killers closing in on his ranch. Hell! A man could only die once. But he did mind the beautiful Sally Wilcox cooking his dinner. A man could die many times, looking into her eyes—and knowing she was a syndicate spy!



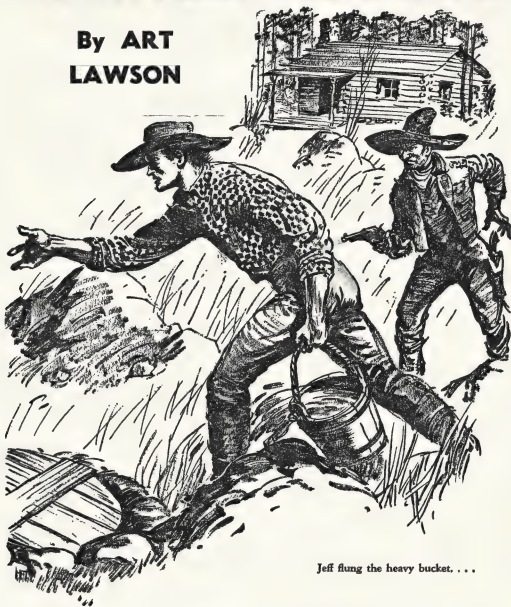
CHAPTER ONE

A Bushwhack Misfires

THOUGH Sam Houston never got to that part of Texas, the citizens of Gravelly Ford named their main street after him just the same. Sam Houston Boulevard was what they called this unhappy roadway that was deep in dust or deeper in mud according to the season; that was exactly one block long; that led from the two-story headquarters building of the Triangle Land and Cattle Company direct to the rounded slope of Boothill Cemetery.

TRIANGLE TRIGGERS

By ART
LAWSON



Jeff flung the heavy bucket. . .

It had, nevertheless, certain natural advantages that Sam would have been quick to appreciate. It was so situated it made a perfect mantrap.

Jeff Carson was thinking about this when he approached from the direction of the ford crossing Turkey Creek. When he reached the junction of the road and the Boulevard

he would immediately be under surveillance of the entire town. Furthermore he would be facing the afternoon sun which would temporarily blind him and make it possible for interested parties downstreet to take a sneak shot at him without being observed.

And then, if he decided to retreat, he would be neatly boxed up. The Triangle's

barbed wire fence would keep him from going South; East was the headquarters building; West the boulevard; North the ford. But by now they would have that covered, too.

Jeff Carson began to grin thinly. His horse sensing the boss's indecision trotted on to the Longhorn Saloon where half a dozen other horses lolled hip-shot at the hitchrack. There the roan stopped, and Jeff dismounted. For a moment he felt more secure than he had since he crossed the creek. Then the shooting started.

It was a quick, hard volley from the saloon, a sudden roar accompanied by cowboy yipping and war whoops. Forty-four calibre slugs kicked open the swinging doors and two-hundred-grain chunks of hot lead hummed by like hornets from hell to bounce off the boardwalk with angry ricochet whines.

In an instant Jeff Carson hit dirt. He felt a sudden plucking at his clothing and the burn of a bullet that creased him. Then he rolled under his horse, avoiding sharp hoofs of the frightened animal and came up on the far side to run hard for the corner of the building. Already someone else had taken shelter there but Jeff crowded in. He hugged the wall and glanced around.

The cowboys who had been responsible for the shooting were being ejected from the Longhorn. There were two of them. They held smoking revolvers in their hands and appeared to be drunk as they whined protests.

"Just shootin' at a li'l ol' packrat," one of them insisted. "Sorry we busted your door. We'll buy you a new one, Amos."

The other cowboy griped: "I seen that packrat hippy-hopin' along an' took a shot at him, is all, Amos. Nothin' wrong in that. C'mon—we'll set up drinks on the house."

Amos was out of sight within the saloon. "You will not," he disagreed. "Git that door first and after this you two'll check your shootin' irons before we serve you."

"Now—listen—Amos—"

The battered swinging doors swung. The cowboys shrugged. In their drunken way they sang a brief and bawdy ballad as they crossed the boardwalk arm in arm. They glanced at Jeff's horse and prepared their faces to show surprise when they found a dead man in the gutter.

Then Jeff saw their neck muscles stiffen, and he heard the break in their song when

they discovered they had not killed him. After that they acted drunker than ever. They climbed aboard their horses, swayed in the saddles. They were facing Jeff now and they saw him in the alley.

"Hyah, Jeff," one of them said. "Shoot-in' packrats. Amos di'n' like it."

Jeff knew this hombre to be one of the Triangle cowboys. For the moment danger was past. The Triangle had pulled its planned trick and had failed. It would take a while to think up a new one. Jeff pouched his pistol and grinned evenly, meanly at the two cowboys.

"Seen the packrat myself," he said. "That's howcome I'm down this alley. I'm scared of packrats—like ladies are scared of mice. Thanks for chasin' him off."

"Think nothin' of it," the cowboy said.

He clung to the horn of his saddle as his horse wheeled away. The second cowboy followed, singing his song. They passed down Sam Houston Boulevard, turned south toward the Triangle gate. When they were gone the person with whom Jeff had found shelter tapped him gently on the shoulder and spoke softly.

"You're wounded, Mister."

JEFF began to blush. He quickly turned his back to the wall. The very lovely, dark-eyed Sally Willcox was laughing at him, not showing proper concern for a man who had been wounded and might have been killed. Now his wound began to sting and Jeff became even redder.

"Ma'am," he said. "I don't aim to spend the evening down this alley. Supposin' you go on out of here ahead of me, huh?"

"Sure," she said. "Ladies first." She stood close to him, looking into his eyes. She had stopped laughing and he thought again as he had so often in the past that there was nothing else in this world as lovely as Sally. She was the kind of girl men dream about during the long and lonely night watches. Thoughts of this kind of girl would bring a lump to your throat when you were eating a lonesome meal and make it difficult for you swallow; and give you reason for building a decent little house instead of an old shanty. Yeah, Sally was all these things for Jeff Carson, and more. She was saying:

"That packrat target practice didn't fool me, either."

Now Jeff forgot his absurd wound. Jeff

said tensely: "Have they been bothering you?"

No!" She shook her head and the black curls danced on her shoulders. Her eyes lost their steadiness for a moment. "And I don't reckon they will," she went on speaking with thinning lips. "You see—I've decided to become—I *have* become—a partner of the Triangle Land and Cattle Company."

Jeff stared at her. He and Sally had held out longer than anyone else on this range, refusing to be swallowed up by that huge outfit. Now she had finally been broken. For Jeff this was horrible news. Jeff's whole body tensed.

"Beginning now—"Jeff said—"those 'No Trespassing' signs on the Circle C apply to you, too, Ma'am. Good-by."

He strode away from her, out of the alley. He reached the doorway of the Longhorn Saloon before the draft to his rear reminded him of his wound. Then he ducked past the splintered gates.

A couple of cowboys turned from the bar to stare at him. They watched him cross the room. When he reached the bar a man at a table laughed at him and Jeff wheeled. During the moment that he had been belly down in the dust of Sam Houston Boulevard one of those forty-four slugs had sliced a long hole in the seat of his levis. Fortunately it had hardly scratched him at all. It had left him angry, rather than hurt. It sent a mad boiling through him.

"Okay, boys," he said. "If anybody thinks it's funny step right out into the middle of the room and I'll give you a sample of the same thing to boast about."

They knew he meant it. Their boss might like to tangle with him, but they didn't. Nobody offered to take him up. The man at the table pretended to be busy with his glass. Most of the others in the barroom began suddenly to talk. The barkeeper said quickly:

"I had trouble enough in here this afternoon—shootin' packrats! Listen here, Jeff, your first drink's on the house. The boys didn't mean nothing—and it does look kinda funny."

"Okay," Jeff said. He shrugged. He turned back to the bar. Nobody laughed this time. There was a little man standing by the back doorway holding a broom. Jeff said to him: "How about running up to the Busy Bee for a new pair of levis for

me. Also you better get me some underbritches. Sol Nevins knows the size. Charge them."

The little man did not move.

The barkeeper said angrily: "Go ahead—your feet froze to the ground?" The little man moved off and the barkeeper poured a drink for Jeff. He poured two more and put all three in a row. Jeff noticed it was the Longhorn's best brand. The barkeeper lifted one of the glasses, dipped his head in the sign language of a toast. "Here's to peace and quiet," he said.

Jeff did not drink that toast. A man next to him had picked up the third glass. He and Jeff were looking at each other in the bar mirror. The man's poker-face was an absolute blank.

"Hyah, Jeff," he said.

"H'lo, Joe," Jeff answered.

Joe Lupton, a mean and lean little hombre, had eyes as hard as marbles. Though he had spent most of his life in the saddle and on the plains in the sun he looked as if he lived in the Longhorn's six-by-six beer cellar. Joe Lupton was ramrod of the Triangle Ranch. He was not the boss of the Triangle Land and Cattle Company, but one of its hirelings. He was leader of their killer crew.

Jeff said to him: "I hear you have a new partner."

"Sure," Lupton said. "Miss Sally Willcox. She lost another bunch of steers the other night and figgered it out she would have more protection as a partner of the Triangle. I'd say she was a mighty smart girl."

"Mighty," Jeff said. "Well—here's to her!"

He gulped the drink. It was smooth and warming. He signed the barkeeper to fill them up again.

"When are you coming in?" Lupton asked softly.

"Ain't saying," Jeff said. "Boss around?"

"Sure—over to headquarters."

"Reckon I'll drop in and talk to him," Jeff said.

The barkeeper had filled the glasses. Jeff looked down at the amber liquor. He felt a gust pass through the barroom as someone opened and closed the back door.

"Maybe you better change your pants first," Lupton suggested. "Here's the swamper with them now."

The swamper appeared behind the bar. He had the pants and underwear rolled in a bundle and tied with a string.

Jeff said to Lupton: "Reckon you're right, Joe." To the barkeeper he added: "Don't mind if I step into the backroom to make a change do you, Amos?"

The barkeeper opened his mouth to say something and Joe Lupton covertly made a hidden gesture that caused the barkeeper to subside. Jeff went around through the rear door. In the dark room behind the saloon he slipped his gunbelt. He took off his boots and levis and longhanded underwear.

He had just gotten into the stiff new clothing and was leaning down to pick up his boots when he realized he had not been alone here. His eyes had now become used to the darkness and he spotted the two cowboys who had been "packrat" hunting. They were sitting on kegs against the wall watching him. They grinned feebly.

Jeff reached for his gunbelt. The man who had done most of the talking out front slowly shook his head.

"Better not," he said.

Jeff's hands froze inches from the Colts. A shadow blocked the door to the barroom. Jeff knew it was Lupton standing there.

"Before you go over to see the boss," Lupton said, "I'd do some thinking about this partnership business."

"Okay," Jeff said. The threat was obvious. Lupton's boys had missed Jeff that afternoon. They would be more careful this time. Jeff added: "I mean—thanks for the advice, Joe."

CHAPTER TWO

The Colonel Talks

IT seemed to Jeff that he had made a very serious mistake. Now that Sally Willcox had given in to the Triangle Land and Cattle Company the enemy was really putting the pressure on him. His cattle had been rustled. One of his wells had curiously become sanded up and the windmill broken. Along the short stretch of creek that touched his range half a dozen big steers had been drowned. On two different occasions snipers up on the Black Buttes had shot horses out from under him when he was trailing lost beef. This afternoon an "accident" had been arranged.

Now he was without shoes or weapons, in a dark room. The Triangle was moving in mighty rigorously today. Jeff Carson was out on a limb.

Jeff tried to ignore the fact that they had him bracketed. He had started to reach for his guns before Lupton had blocked the doorway. Now he continued this interrupted move. His fingers curled on the belt without feeling. The weight of the guns was nothing in his hands. He drew back the belt and buckled it around his waist. Sweat spurted to his forehead.

"Yeah"—Lupton was saying—"I'd do a lot of thinking, Jeff."

"Sure," Jeff said. "I am."

"That's fine," Lupton said.

Having his guns was no comfort to Jeff. They did not even give him the bit of false security he had felt when he first dismounted before the saloon. Now he felt a moment of panic, an emotion that had never before swayed him. It was a fear beyond the range that plain guts could handle. Joe Lupton had him here in a trap and was playing with him as a mountain cougar might have done.

Jeff twitched his hips to settle the belt. Then he picked up his boots and walked over to a packing case and sat down. He winced at the sudden discomfort of his forgotten fount, then rootched over so he could put on his boots without further prodding his hurt. The cowboys were grinning widely at him from the shadows.

"Maybe I ought to go with you," Lupton said.

"Why not?" Jeff agreed.

He stamped into a boot—into the other. Silver spurs rang with music. Jeff was beginning to feel whole again. He rolled up his torn clothing and tucked it under his arm. The stiff goods of the new levis crinkled with a soft scratching sound and the smell of indigo dye was strong in Jeff's nostrils.

"I'm ready," Jeff said.

"Good," Lupton nodded.

The Triangle man turned his back on Jeff and moved slowly back into the barroom. It took a split second for Jeff to figure this one. Instead of following he swung around in a falling crouch and slipped his left-hand gun from its holster.

Some cowboy angel must have directed that move. The two Triangle men had already started reaching. Their guns were

out and one of the men had taken a deep breath in preparation for a shot. As if this had happened to Jeff a dozen times before he knew exactly what was up.

"Go ahead and holler," he whispered, "and I'll plug you both."

The men licked lips. Hands stiff on gun-buttts slowly relaxed. They dropped their weapons back into holsters. Meanwhile Lupton had moved only a very short distance from the doorway. He was waiting for his men to swing into action.

"I'll be out in a second, Joe," Jeff shouted. "Pour me a drink."

Lupton had to go on. When he was clear of the doorway Jeff said to the cowboys: "Next time I see you two, I'll kill you."

He sidled over to the door. He straightened shoulders, repouched his gun, and went into the barroom. The sweat had dried on his forehead and the salt of it crinkled faintly. Joe Lupton's lips were tight against white teeth. He motioned to a couple of filled whisky glasses.

"Uh—Amos poured us a brace of drinks, Jeff," he said. "You look mighty snappy in your new pants."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "I feel like I was all dressed up for a funeral."

"Sure," Lupton said.

"But not mine!" Jeff began to grin.

BIG hanging lamps shed a glow even in daytime over the big mahogany desk in the boss's office of the Triangle Land and Cattle Company's headquarters. Behind the desk Colonel Cordes sat looking down the short length of Sam Houston Boulevard to Boothill Cemetery.

On both sides of the street were various establishments all belonging to or under control of the Company. The Longhorn Saloon and the bank, the Busy Bee Dry Goods and Fancy Groceries and the Triangle Hotel—everything but the church which Colonel Cordes had "given to God," and the absolutely useless horse trough in

the exact center of the Boulevard which he had dedicated to himself. *Erected by Col. Cordes for the comfort of man's greatest and truest friend—The Horse.* It was a fancy item of carved soapstone—but the horses still preferred the creek where they did not have to read about their virtues while enjoying a cold drink.

The Colonel liked to sit at this desk and admire his handiwork; but eventually his eyes would lift beyond the low cross-studded slope of Boothill to the dark frown of Black Buttes. Those Black Buttes galled him like a saddle sore. They symbolized the one thing he could see from his swivel chair that was not within his domain—for below them, between the Black Buttes and Turkey creek spread the lush green acres of Jeff Carson's Circle C.

Today the Colonel concentrated on Jeff's horse standig lazily before the Longhorn, and his ears listened for the sound of shots from the back room where his two gunnies were going to accuse Jeff or trying to shoot Lupton in the back. Then they were going to kill Jeff. So the Colonel listened and heard nothing, and after a while the slat doors opened and Jeff came out into the dusk-darkened street with Joe Lupton. The two aimed direct for headquarters, walking close together like good friends.

When they came into the Colonel's office Jeff was laughing as if at a joke. He came in first, letting Lupton get behind him a moment, but he walked with an easy lightness that knew no fear. The Colonel stood up under his big lamp and held his hand out to Jeff.

"Glad to see you, Jeff, my boy. I know you changed your mind. Glad to welcome you into the organization."

Jeff ignored the Colonel's hand. The light laughter was still in Jeff. It was as if suddenly all this tenseness and trouble had become comical.

"I got your note," Jeff said. "I want to talk about it."

Art Lawson, author of the story you are now reading, will be with us next month with a novel-length, dramatic story of the blizzard-blasted cow ranges. He calls it, "Coffins Free!" You can read it in the June 10 STORY WESTERN —on sale May 10th!

"Of course," the Colonel said.

He had misread Jeff. Jeff was going to cause more trouble. Abashed that Jeff had not taken his hand the Colonel pretended he had been reaching for a paper on the desk. He picked up the paper and mumbled something and put it in the top desk drawer. He left the drawer open so Jeff could see the six-shooter lying cocked inside the drawer.

Jeff ignored that, too. The third drink in the Longhorn had done something to Jeff. A miracle had saved his life once today. A freak hunch had saved it a second time. Maybe tomorrow the Triangle would get him, Jeff thought, but not today. Today was his lucky day and none of the Colonel's schemes could reach him.

"It's about this note," Jeff went on. He took a paper from a pocket, unfolded it carefully, and spread it out on the desk in front of the Colonel. "Very interesting," Jeff said. "You got something here, Colonel. 'Because of the increase in rustling and lawlessness in the Turkey Creek country we feel that a partnership of all local ranchers would be more beneficent—'" Jeff looked up from his reading. "That's a wonderful word, Colonel, but you got it spelled wrong. Beneficent don't have that second 'I.' What's more you used it wrong. The word means being kind or doing good. I looked it up in the dictionary."

The Colonel's heavy face went red, then white.

"What's all this damn foolishness—?" he shouted.

Jeff grinned evenly. He tapped the paper with a finger.

"It ain't damn foolishness," he said. "Sometimes I don't talk so good, but I did go to school for a couple sessions and learned a couple things there. I learned spelling, for instance. I can spell skunk correct every time. I learned reading, too. I can read skunk sign a mile off, Colonel. I learned my sums. They all add up to one thing, Colonel. You tried to kill me twice today. That don't seem beneficent to me."

He waited a moment while the Colonel stared at him. He did not know what Joe Lupton was doing, for Joe had a way of working himself around behind a man. But Jeff was not worried about Joe just now. The Colonel's anger had become a cold thing.

"You cannot prove—" he started.

Jeff cut in. "I'm not trying to prove anything, Colonel. I just hope you remember this little spelling lesson. Next lesson is in punctuation." He patted his six-shooter holster. "I don't use anything but periods in my punctuation. But if you want a lesson, or if any of your boys want one, just drop in at the Circle C."

He grinned in the Colonel's heavy face, then wheeled and strode to the door. There he stood a moment on the threshold and glanced back at the Triangle chief still frozen behind his desk. Joe Lupton was waiting patiently for orders or some sign from his boss.

"Bring your new pardner," Jeff suggested bitterly.

He strode out to the range road at the foot of Sam Houston Boulevard. He walked across its dusty width to his horse. Without once looking around he stepped into his saddle and headed for the ford.

CHAPTER THREE

Drygulch Detour

JEFF knew they would strike him in the dark. He knew that they would hit him from behind now. This feud was wide open—but its methods would be hidden. The Colonel would plan things out to the last item—then hit and hit hard. Very probably he would arrange it so that Jeff would be outlawed somehow. This would make it possible for the Colonel to hunt Jeff down in force.

One after another Jeff's cowboys quit as they learned of the double-try on Jeff's life. These boys all had excuses; Ma was sick in Arkansas; or they had to go back to their home in California. A couple of the boys did not offer their excuses in person. They figured things out in a scientific manner and ran off without announcing their going. With them went half a hundred Circle C cattle, cows all of them, good and fat and young, cows to start a herd someplace. Jeff did not try to trail this pair. He knew that if he had done so all the rest of his beef would vanish during his absence.

Finally Jeff was alone, completely deserted. He took to sleeping away from his cabin, keeping a couple horses handy but careful not to picket them together so he would not lose both at once and consequently be put afoot. He turned the rest of his

horses loose on the theory that the animals would not be so easily stolen on the open range, and he drove his cattle from the creek up to Black Buttes where anyone trying to rustle them would have to cross all the way over his range. After that Jeff rode a lot, riding warily through the long summer days, keeping to the far edges of his land. He rode knowing that death always rode with him.

It was while he was on one of these trips that he spotted Sally Willcox trotting up from the creek toward the little building that was Jeff's home. He recognized her because of the long riding habit she wore and her characteristic seat in the side saddle. Through field glasses he saw that she carried a rifle in saddle boot. He wondered if she also had her little derringer hidden in a pocket of the habit.

Jeff rode down to intercept the girl. He waited on her trail a while to see if she was being followed, then went on up to the house. She had already dismounted and gone inside. Fifteen minutes ahead of him she had opened the windows to air the place and was busily sweeping the floor when he stepped into the living room. A solid shaft of sunlight struck from the open window onto the long work-polished table in the corner of the room. Reflected beams shone in the girl's dark eyes.

"You look thin," was her greeting.

"I should think I would," he said coldly. "I used to hire twenty cowboys. I used to have a Chinaman to do the cooking. There was always a couple kids to watch my horses and a blacksmith to fix the windmills and other junk. Recently I've been doing all these things myself—except for the cooking."

She seemed about to speak, but he laughed harshly and she bit her lip.

"Of course there's not much work any longer," he said. "And I don't need to cook because I don't have anything to eat. Now—can I help you into your saddle. Partners of the Triangle aren't welcome here."

She was stiff-backed in the long severe dress. She held the worn broom in a tight fist, and her chin was set with determination.

"I brought some food and a bottle of whisky that I found down in my cellar," she said evenly. "I thought I'd clean up this place and cook you a decent meal. You can help me into my saddle later."

Sally returned to her sweeping. She gathered the little pile of dust in a wooden pan and dumped it into a buttertub wastebasket. She looked into the stove, gave it a bit of a poking, then started a fire. She went about all this in a methodical, dogged manner, ignoring Jeff except when he happened to be in the way. Then she emptied her saddlebags on the table. She had brought a steak and potatoes and fixings for an apple pie. There was freshly ground coffee and this dusty old bottle of whisky. The fire was snapping sharply in the stove.

"You can bring a pail of water," she said. "Then you can mix us a drink."

"Us?"

"Why not?" she said shortly. "I'm a partner in the biggest ranch in Texas. I'm of age. All the other partners drink. Why shouldn't I?"

Jeff shrugged. He could not do anything about this girl. He could not savvy her play at all. It had been almost six weeks since he had seen her on the day he had found shelter with her in an alley in town. He wondered what she had been doing all that time.

"Are you going," she asked.

"Oh—sure," he said, startled. He crossed over to the sink where half a dozen pails hung on pegs and took two of them. They clanged together musically. He avoided looking at the girl as he went back to the door but from the corner of his eye he saw that she was busying herself with the food she had brought. Hunger pain clawed at his stomach, and he stepped outside into the sunshine and walked down-slope toward the spring.

Long ago, before the feud with the Triangle, he had intended piping this spring to his cabin. He had even built the foundation for a tank and windmill, but had gone no farther. Now, at the edge of timber, he glanced back at the little log structure there on the hill. Smoke came from its chimney—a horse with sidesaddle stood beside his mount at the front door. Inside was the girl who had been there before only in his dreams.

A softness touched Jeff's heart. For a moment he forgot that he was a pariah on his own range and he smiled softly as he returned to his chore.

It was only a few more steps to the spring. He lifted the wooden cover. A frog plopped into a hole in the stone coping.

Jeff filled the two buckets brimful of this cold, silvery fluid and stood holding them a moment, standing on one foot while he shoved the cover back with the other. Then he swung onto the trail.

Blocking him, with a pistol ready, was Joe Lupton.

"I got two boys in the timber yonderly," Joe said evenly. "We don't aim to hurt you—but—"

JEFF could think only that the girl had brought these men and contrived to trap him. She had built a smoke in his chimney to call them and had sent him down to the spring where they were waiting in ambush. That made a good deal of difference to Jeff Carson. He had had a warm dream of her a moment ago and now she was a stiletto twisting in his heart. A couple of men in the brush did not mean a thing to Jeff. He had to get to that girl and beat this treachery out of her.

"Move over," Jeff said.

Lupton's voice was ready.

"You don't seem to be as observant as you used to be, Jeff. You're missing some of the smaller details of this situation."

"If you mean that deputy star on your chest," Jeff said, "I saw it before I saw you. Brand new, ain't it?"

"Yeah," Lupton said. "So is the warrant I got here for your arrest. Want me to read it to you? I think I'm supposed to. I got a rulebook on how to be a deputy but ain't finished reading it yet, so maybe I'm wrong."

"I wouldn't know," Jeff said. "I never been a deputy and never had a warrant read to me. Now—move over, Tinstar. I ain't playing cops and robbers today."

There was a sound of leaves rustling against clothing behind Jeff, the crack of a twig under a carelessly placed boot. He had not been sure whether or not Lupton had his two killers with him. Now it seemed that the Triangle man had come with plenty backing. Still the red haze in Jeff's brain burned bright at the thought of the girl double-crossing him. He was careless of his life and he stepped on down the path even though Lupton still blocked it. Lupton waved a paper with his left hand.

"You better stop," he shouted. "This is serious. Horse thieving—wire-cutting—"

Jeff laughed at him. Lupton was menacing with his pistol. Now one of his men

was running down the path behind Jeff, aiming to tackle him. Jeff still held both filled waterbuckets in his two fists, and his mind worked quickly with a plan of counter-attack. He stumbled forward on one knee. As he did so he whirled around, back to Lupton, and flung one of his pails into the face of the charging gunman. He dropped the other on the ground and came up in a low run direct for Joe Lupton.

Jeff had figured things out right that time. The man he had attacked had instinctively reached for a gun and plugged out one-half-blinded shot before he realized that he was shooting over Jeff's head and at his own boss. Joe screamed a curse and lifted his own sights on his own man who was momentarily a greater menace than the man he had come to arrest. Meanwhile Jeff came at him from underneath. He lifted the lighter Lupton from the ground, reached around behind for the hand holding the pistol, and ran up out of the timber with the Triangle ramrod.

Lupton was over Jeff's shoulder. As he regained his breath he tried to knee Jeff's face. Jeff reached open country where he ducked his head to throw Lupton down. This lean, saturnine man struck hard on the turf and limply bounced. Jeff quickly stamped on his right wrist. He heard the bone crack, and he leaned down to take Lupton's pistol. Lupton was swearing bitterly and weakly. The starch had been beaten out of him already, and his arm was pinned to the ground under the high heel of Jeff's boot.

Now the first of the Triangle gunnies came running from the woods and Jeff shot him. He hit him high on the shoulder, spinning him around once before tumbling him back into the brush. Behind him the second man ground to a halt and was knocked off balance when he collided with his partner. They were stacked up there a moment, impotent, perfect targets for Jeff Carson.

Jeff held fire. He had one of his own pistols in his left hand now, Joe Lupton's in his right. He had crouched low to use as much of Lupton's lean body as possible for shelter. It was scarcely satisfactory, but combined with the sudden fury of battle it helped. Jeff did not give the two others time in which to untangle.

"Drop your guns," he shouted. "Lift your hands—or—I'll—"

Two hands went up, white against the dark brush. The first cowboy was clutching a broken collar bone. He had lost all interest in fighting. He came out sullenly with his friend and by their eyes and the soft sounds of swishing grass Jeff learned that the girl had come down from the house.

"Gather up their guns," he said, "and their knives. Get all their ammunition. Find their horses and take their rifles. Then cut the cinches on their saddles and we'll let them ride home bareback."

The wounded man's eyes lighted briefly with this news of reprieve. The other undid both their gunbelts and threw them onto the ground near Jeff. Jeff took his foot from Lupton's wrist and personally went over the man for weapons. The girl carrying her rifle under an arm was efficiently frisking the two gunmen for knives. They told her where the horses were and she went down into the timber to finish the job. She brought the horses out with saddles made useless by cut cinches.



"It's the law you're bucking this time," Lupton said with a bitter monotone. "There'll be posSES—"

"You won't be with them," Jeff said. "And tell your boss, when you see him, something else I learned in school. Tell him you can pin a tinstar on a skunk but it don't make him smell any sweeter. That lesson goes under the heading of Natural History."

"You learned an awful lot for a feller didn't pass the third grade," Lupton said.

"Enough, anyhow," Jeff said.

Jeff walked away from them. As he got nearer the house he smelled something and he started to run. He yanked open the oven door and dragged out a pie that was just beginning to burn. Then he remembered the water he was supposed to have fetched from the spring.

He got two more pails from their pegs and headed down-slope again. On the way he passed the girl coming toward the house straining under sixty pounds of assorted weapons and ammunition. He wanted to grin at her, but his mouth was too stiff.

HE mixed a bit of whisky with cool water and gave it to the girl. He took his own straight with a glass of water as chaser. She sipped at her drink, waiting while the potatoes boiled, and after a while he picked up the bottle for a second. He said, "May I?" and when she nodded he slowly poured three fingers down the side of the tumbler.

That "May I?" was the first thing he had said to her since the fight. His scrap with Joe Lupton had had a curious effect on him. It had washed out of him all that original blind hatred for the girl. The horrible anger had been replaced by a curiosity. She must have known that they were trying to frame him. Had she become a partner in spirit as well as in fact with the Triangle Land and Cattle Company?

"I suppose there is no use telling you I didn't know they were there?" she said suddenly.

"I fetched the water you sent me for," he said, "and mixed your drink. Now I'm sitting here having a dream. Just go ahead and get me this meal you promised to fatten me up on. I've had a hard day and don't feel like getting into an argument."

"Well—I *didn't* know!" she insisted. "First I knew of it was when I heard that shot and looked out the door." She glanced at him. His face had hardened. Her voice became a bit petulant. "I *am* getting supper. Potatoes will cook only as fast as potatoes will cook. I can't speed them up."

"Okay," he said.

He was sitting on his porch, or "gallery" as they are called in Texas, looking over the up-creek land toward Black Buttes. This was the most beautiful piece of country in the world and it was his. Yonder his cattle grazed this rich grass. His horses were scattered along the never-failing creek. An odor of cooking, of woman's cooking was coming from his cabin. Day was done and he could sit here a while drinking fine old whisky. For a while he could live without thinking of tomorrow.

"My being a partner in the Triangle is in name only," the girl broke into his reverie. "They run your cattle for you. They make a monthly statement. They pay you a sum of money that represents your share and it won't even pay for your groceries. Being a partner in the Triangle is—"

"I told you to keep quiet," Jeff said.

The girl shut up. Jeff tried not to think

about the fight down there by the spring and all its implications. Yet always this thing came back to nag at him. The girl was so quiet Jeff thought she was crying. He looked over at her. Her eyes were dry. They were steady on him, dark and cool. Her mouth twitched and suddenly she burst out.

"You're too damn smart, Mister Carson. You know all about everything. You can read sign like a hawk. You know exactly how everything fits together. I heard how you had learned to spell skunk in school. But I'm telling you—you—are not spelling it right this time. As far as I'm concerned you can go to hell with your skunk spelling lessons."

She began to cry as she flung herself out of the creaky chair and into the house. Startled, Jeff stared dumbly at her. Minutes later steak sizzled viciously on a too hot frying pan. He turned to his beautiful land and found it dull and faded and desolate. Those beeves yonder were thin from being chased around too much. Behind every tree was an ambush gun. Maybe—he tried to keep the thought from forming—he was a bit over-suspicious. Maybe they had used this girl. She had been fool enough to join their "partnership." Maybe she was fool enough to show in some way what she intended doing when she rode out here today.

Jeff went to the doorway. Sally's back was to him, turned resolutely against him. She flipped the steak in the frying pan with a smooth roll that did not splash hot fat. It sizzled pleasantly now. Then she poured steaming water from the potatoes and mashed them with a wooden pestle. She added butter and milk and beat it to a froth.

"Sit down," she said without facing him. Stiffly he moved to the chair. "Look out," she advised, "there might be a tack on the seat."

He glanced down without thinking, then woke up and bit his lower lip.

"I'm sorry," he said.

HE took her home after supper. The good food and whisky had warmed his stomach and made him sleepy. But these luxuries had nevertheless left his mind cold and alert, a thing that was separate from him, that seemed even to be a stranger to himself.

This riding in the moonlight with Sally Willcox was part of the old dream. The rhythm of the horses was in it, the graceful swing of the girl in the saddle. The rich scents of a midsummer night were of the dream, too; but even when his arms ached with the desire of holding the girl, his icy brain told him he could not relax a minute.

The ranch that had been Sally's was on this side of the river, adjoining the Circle C to the east. Since she had become a partner in the great Triangle outfit a barbed wire fence had been run along the old unmarked boundary. Eventually the man and girl came to it and when Jeff got down to make an opening he noticed that the posts were small and lightly placed, that the wire was only a single strand that in places was tacked to saplings or trees.

He cut the strand close to one of the flimsy posts and let the wire roll up itself. It rolled with a quick little *ping* indicating that it had only very recently been strung.

Jeff got back into the saddle and rode abreast with the girl through the opening he had made.

"Temporary," he said briefly. "They don't figure there'll be a boundary here very long."

The girl knelt her horse up to his, stopping him. His curiosity was piqued. Instinct put him on guard. Only his common sense told him that Sally could not have rigged another trap because she had not been in communication with the enemy. Then he saw by the way her tongue moved across her lips that she had stopped him to speak to him and could not think readily of the words that would express the thoughts that had halted her.

His horse shied nervously when she crowded him. He lifted a hand to ward her off and surprisingly found that he was holding her arm. He started to speak, but she cut in.

"Look"—she said. "I mean—it's a big world. I have some money in the bank. You have some cattle. You can sell your rights to the Circle C. I know the Colonel will pay to get shut of you. He won't pay more than a fraction of what the place is worth—but—" Jeff's fingers tightened on the girl's arm. She began to talk with a quick rush of words as if she had only warmed up so far. "You can't buck them, Jeff. You and I—we can go to Montana—"

Arizona—anywhere. We can start off with a little place—anything would be better than a grave in Texas.”

Jeff slowly shook his head. “That would be running away,” he said. “Maybe running away is smart, I don’t know, I didn’t go to school long enough to know what was smart. But Ma and Pa are both buried there on the Circle C land and I aim to be buried there, myself. A grave in Texas is better than anything else anywhere for me. But I don’t plan on being buried yet, for a spell.”

The girl’s face was white in the moonlight, her eyes black and unreadable. She sat on her fine horse staring at him and after a while the slightest curve of a smile tugged at her rich mouth. It widened a little and the stars came to her eyes and he saw the line of her white teeth. He eased that hard grip on her arm. His hands moved by themselves, one of them cupping her rounded shoulder.

“I can’t help it,” he said, “and I don’t intend to apologize for not being able to help it.”

“Of course,” she whispered. “I knew that all the time. I was just fooling myself. Like when I finally decided to join the Triangle. I thought that would bring peace. I figured you would have to join if I did and—I—Jeff—” the girl’s whole face had lighted up. “Jeff, I don’t want you to take me home. I’m going to leave you here. There might be—oh—anybody might be waiting around the house. I’m going now—you’ll never have to leave Texas.”

She ran everything together, then impulsively she leaned to him and kissed him full upon the mouth, brief and sweet and cool. Then she reached about to strike her horse smartly with the crop she carried and the lean mount spurted ahead into the brush.

Jeff watched her go, and after she had disappeared he listened to the steady tattoo of her horse’s hoofs. He heard their high sound drop to a dead thumping in the soft ground of a swale, then lift again over the harder terrain below.

He listened while the hoofs told him of Sally’s trip toward her rancho. Then the iron sharply rang on shale—a moment of silence—a lope steadily decreasing in volume across the prairie.

She had not gone home. She had crossed

the creek and was riding for Gravelly Ford where Colonel Cordes had his headquarters at the end of a street named after a dead hero.

CHAPTER FOUR

“No Fences Here!”

JEFF CARSON could still taste the rich sweetness of the girl’s hasty kiss, and the palm of his hand was warm from holding her. He remembered what she had said: “I’m going now— You’ll never have to leave Texas.”

This goaded him. Perversely, now that she was gone, this devotion to his homeland seemed a little silly to him. He was digging himself a shallow grave here in Texas when he might rather have been building an exciting and full life on some greener range. In the end he would lose everything if he insisted on sticking to this insane course.

But she had said he would never have to leave.

It took a while for that to sink in, for it to make sense to him. He began to feel the meaning of it before he had it all reasoned out and he turned his horse back-trail, then headed south, heading in a more direct route to Gravelly Ford than that taken by the girl. He stopped once to listen for the sounds of her horse on the prairie but could not sort them from the other night sounds. Then he went on, not daring anything faster than a trot for fear of exposing himself. The last mile or so he kept away from the river until he intercepted the old road and then headed directly for town at an easy walk.

Nearly six weeks had passed since he had last looked into Gravelly Ford. Most of the summer had withered away. The lazy season was reaching an end and the creek crossing was so shallow white water rippled on the pebbly bottom. Otherwise nothing seemed changed. Yonder on the range road was the big headquarters building of the Triangle outfit, dominating the town, squatting like some huge beast at the end of the short street called Sam Houston Boulevard.

At the other end was the cross-specked mound of Boothill; and halfway down the block was the short spire of the Church

with which Colonel Cordes had tried to salve his soul. From the Longhorn saloon came the ragged music of a quartette trying to harmonize "The Forgotten." Old Sol Nevins' dog howled at the moon and a coyote answered from the prairie. To Jeff watching from the far bank it seemed a perfectly normal night for the town of Gravelly Ford.

He wondered if he had misjudged the girl again. He had thought when he heard her riding for town that she must be going in to make her report to Colonel Cordes. But she had not appeared, yet. Then he saw her.

She had left her horse behind the Triangle fence and come on afoot. He knew it was her by the riding habit that she held above neat ankles as she hurried along. She kept to shadows. Before entering the Triangle headquarters she hesitated a moment, glancing down the Boulevard. Then she stepped inside.

That was when Jeff knew real bitterness. When she had kissed him he had been ready to believe anything good about her. There had been an overtone in her voice that had built a confidence in him and told him that she was sincere. Now he saw it all lined up neat and horrible. From the first chance meeting in town when she had sold out to the Triangle she had really been with them.

Feeling sick and swindled, Jeff turned his horse away from the river. There was nothing left for him to do but round up as many of his cattle as he could quickly find and hightail. There was nothing left here but the grave that he no longer was so sure he wanted. If the Triangle ever caught him now they would ruthlessly shoot him down. They could explain it away as *Ley de fuego*, the law of fire which made it legal to shoot a man who was trying to "escape" from a posse. Sticking to the Circle C had become both untenable and very meaningless.

The time had come to leave.

He lifted his reins, then drew the leather tight again in a sudden convulsive motion. A woman was shouting something distantly muffled. It was a girl's voice, no doubt of it, and before Jeff could surely place its location a single shot thumped like a firecracker in a barrel. The girl screamed sharply. She was in Colonel Cordes office.

THE scream was not a cry of fear, it was more like an Indian warwhoop, a battle-cry. But it gathered up all Jeff's scattered thoughts and indecision and made them into one tight little ball of determination. He rolled his spurs, jumped his horse down the shallow sloping bank of Turkey Creek and into the ford.

Here the water was hardly deep enough to wet his horse's hoofs. Underfoot the gravel was solid as a graded road and Jeff crossed the creek with the speed of a quarter horse making a race.

He reached the far side while two more shots pounded dully through the night, and climbed the south bank without slowing down at all while all the dogs in town woke to bellow at the sky and the swinging doors of the Longhorn slatted madly under a stampede of cowboys.

Jeff slid from his saddle, over the horse's rump, landing on a run before he reached the intersection of Sam Houston Boulevard and the range road. He nearly lost his balance, then stumbled forward, righted himself and veered sharply left toward the corner false-front that housed a combination barbershop, public bath and low-price flop house. He collided with the wall still running, bounced back, dodged around behind the shop and out of sight in the black alley shadows.

When he ran into somebody there he took it for granted that it was one of the guards the Colonel always kept spotted around town of a night. He brought up a hard fist that caught the man under the chin and tumbled him down the creek bank. There in the moonlight the hombre sprawled, his sixshooter glistening brightly. Jeff leaned against the wall, biting his lips to still a runaway heart.

There was no one else here, only the hot-soapy stink of the open drain from the baths inside the building. Out on the range road, though, there was excitement. Someone had caught Jeff's horse and a small clump of men had gathered to examine it in wonder.

Most of the people, though, were grouped around the big windows of the Triangle Land and Cattle Company staring inside as if at some very fine display. Then a couple men near the horse faded away and Jeff knew they were hunting for him.

He ran past the rear of the barbershop,

skidding in the slush, then walked past the church to the alley between it and the hotel. He put his face as close to the ground as possible and squinted down the alley toward the Boulevard. Thus he would have sky-lighted anyone in there, but he saw no one and took his chance.

He moved along close to the wall. Reaching the boardwalk, he hesitated again. There was nobody near at hand, so he pulled his hat down a bit more over his eyes and stepped into plain view. He was taking the chance that boldness and darkness would temporarily conceal his identity.

He went on at a dogtrot toward the commotion. By the barbershop he stopped again. The barber and a man who was half-shaved stood in the doorway staring. Jeff kept out of the lamplight.

"What's up?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"That gal tried to shoot the Colonel," the barber said with awe. He glanced about as he spoke but did not really look at Jeff. The half-shaved customer added: "Missed him."

The crowd in front of the headquarters building broke up as suddenly as if it had been dynamited. Men scattered in all directions. Most came down Sam Houston Boulevard at a dead run, ducking into doorways and making a rush for the Longhorn. They shouted at the barber.

"Jeff Carson's in town—better get under cover."

"Inside, stranger," the barber said very quietly.

For a second he and his customer jammed the door they were so anxious to get out of sight. Then they disappeared and the street was deserted. Across the way the saloon's swing-doors slatted back and forth sending out spurts of light. Then they, too, died.

Jeff grinned coldly to himself. His bold front had gotten him this far. It would take him the rest of the way. He stepped

into the clear again and went on his way. He crossed the road, even walking on the edge of the light squares from the Triangle windows. At the door to the office he hesitated a moment. Then he opened it quickly and stepped inside. He closed it with a flick of his heel.

"Pull the blinds, boys," the Colonel said. "We don't want anyone looking in on this act."

JEFF laughed with short harshness. The Colonel as usual was sitting behind his desk. A cowboy Jeff had not seen from outside pulled each of the blinds all the way to the bottom then retired to a corner where he stood holding a shotgun ready.

Against the wall beside a filing cabinet Sally Willcox stood stiff and cool and lovely in the riding habit that added slim inches to her short and beautiful figure. A man was behind Jeff, and there was a cowboy in each of the rear corners of the room. They held double-barrelled shotguns, too. Jeff wondered who was behind him.

"I figured that's what you'd do," the Colonel said. "I figured you would be shadowing my partner. When she took that shot at me I kinda figured you'd come to finish the job."

Jeff looked at the girl. There was no expression at all on her face. Her hands were in sight and she did not have a gun nor was she tied up. She did not look as if she had been doing any fighting. She might yet be working with the Triangle, Jeff realized. But he no longer believed it.

Jeff glanced back at the Colonel. Then he noticed the girl's derringer on the mahogany desk. The boss of the Triangle had a heavy smug satisfaction etched deep in his face.

"Well—" he said to Jeff.

Jeff said: "You figured everything perfect, Colonel." He tried a bluff. "I hear tell you're a wizard with a sixshooter. Isn't this a good time to prove it?"

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

The Colonel laughed at him. "Thanks for the compliment," he said, "but I don't need to prove anything now. I've got all the aces, feller. You taught me how to spell. I'll teach you poker. You can't make a bluff when the other man has all the aces."

These cowboys with the shotguns were the Colonel's aces. Jeff wondered if the man behind him had a shotgun, too. Jeff began to grin faintly.

"I played a game of poker once," he said. "This hombre thought he had all the aces in his hand. But he didn't. The one in the hole was a deuce."

The Colonel's eyes flicked and touched the man behind Jeff and Jeff realized that this man was Joe Lupton. Jeff had broken Lupton's wrist that afternoon. Lupton would not be in fit condition to use a shotgun. Jeff grinned easily.

"You already lost your pot, Colonel," he said. "Three aces ain't enough."

The Colonel shrugged heavy shoulders.

"There's a back door to this building, Jeff," he said evenly. "If you'll just sign a little paper I've had made out for some time, I'll let you walk out that back door and nobody'll follow you. If you won't sign that paper—" He nodded to his firing squad. "Uh—" the Colonel went on—"Miss Willcox has just sold her share in the Triangle to the company. She is going to leave by way of the back door, too."

Grim-lipped the girl nodded faintly, confirming this. Jeff lifted a hand to tilt his hat over his forehead. He let his breath go in a hiss and shrugged resignedly.

"Got the paper there?" he asked.

"Sure," the Colonel said.

"Get it out," Jeff said.

He started toward the desk. Colonel Cordes opened his long top drawer. In it was the dark shadow of his pistol. Jeff stood just touching the desk and the Colonel reached into the drawer for a paper. As he did so Jeff shouted:

"No you don't. He's reaching—"

The Colonel did exactly what Jeff thought he would. He hesitated—then grabbed his pistol in a brief moment of panic. The Colonel had temporarily forgotten his poker—and Jeff levelled his own gun first and shot the Triangle boss. He shot him twice in the head and the Colonel slumped back, falling out of his swivel chair and shooting

right into the ceiling in his death throes.

At the same time Jeff dropped in front of the desk, whirling around to put his back to the great heavy piece of furniture and the gunmen in the rear of the room. He punched a shot at the cowboy who had drawn the blinds, knocking the shotgun from his frightened grip. In the other front corner was Joe Lupton with his arm in a sling. Joe could not shoot worth a damn with his left hand and he did not even try.

In the two back corners the Colonel's gunnies waited for Jeff to show above the desk, but Jeff was not playing Jack-in-the-Box for them.

"We'll let by-gones be by-gones," Jeff said. "The Colonel's dead. I don't know how many cattle he's got, boys. I don't know how much money's in his safe. I don't even care. All I want is the deed to Sally Willcox's spread and a chance to ride out of town."

The boys considered this.

"Okay," Joe Lupton said.

Jeff stood up. For a moment his short hairs prickled like a hedgehog's barbs.

Joe Lupton said in a whisper: "I seen him try to kill you, Jeff. We all seen it. We seen you kill him in self-defense. . . . You broke my wrist this afternoon, Jeff, but you didn't plug me tonight when you could of. I—I'd like to work for the Circle C. Maybe I can gather up a crew."

"Thanks," Jeff said.

Sally Willcox was beside him.

"Come on, Jeff," she said.

Lupton led the way. Sally and Jeff followed him into Sam Houston Boulevard. The fancy name for the dusty street no longer seemed so ludicrous to Jeff. Someday a big town would line it with fine buildings. Jeff helped the girl into her saddle. Lupton brought up his horse and they rode out of town across the ford. There Lupton left them while Sally and Jeff trotted on toward her home. When they reached the barbed wire fence Jeff stopped. The moon was low and the fence glistened like silver.

"We'll pull it up tomorrow," Jeff said.

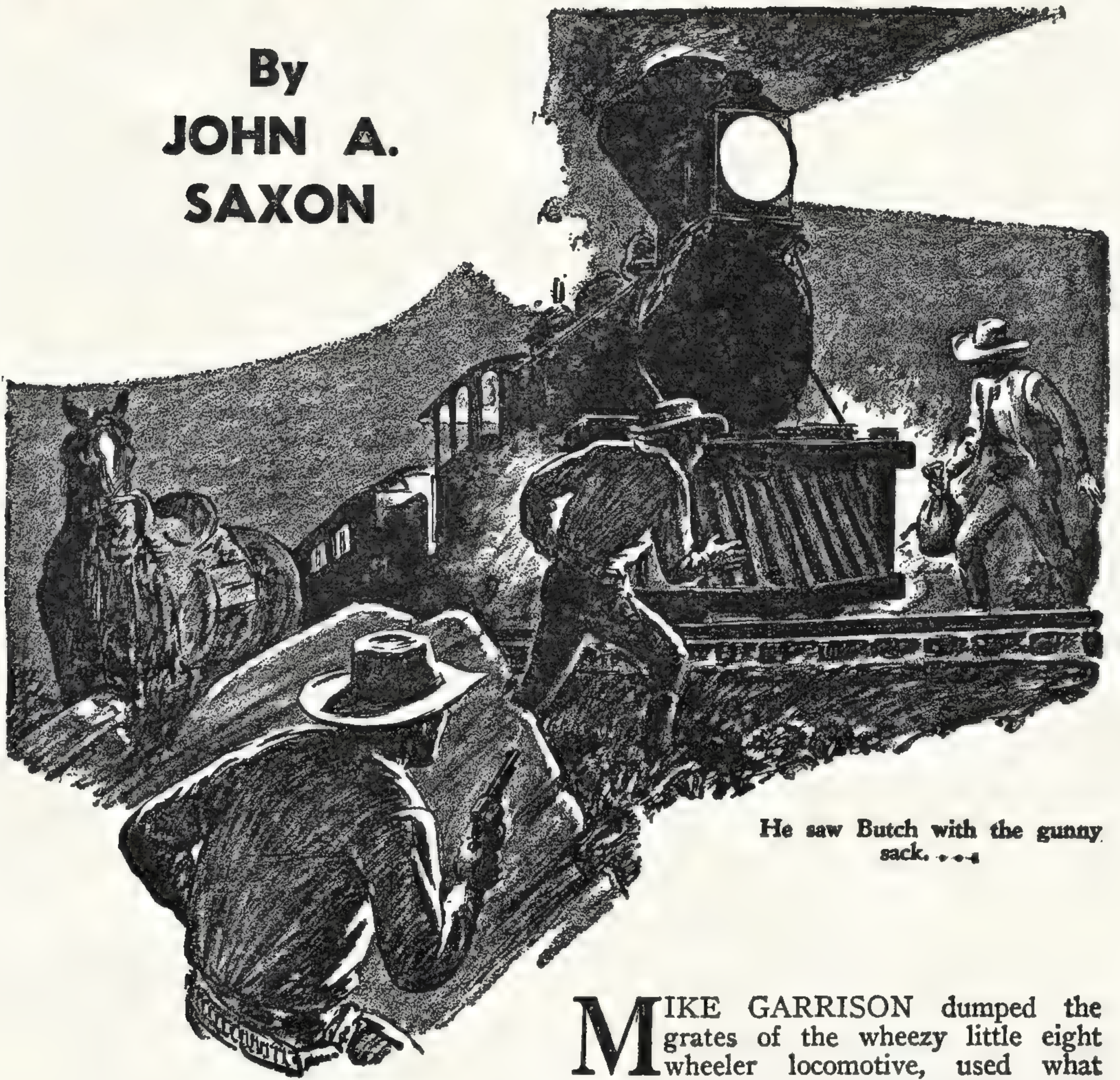
"There'll never be another fence here," Sally said.

Jeff brought his horse around to hers and lifted her from the saddle. She was light as a child on his knees, soft and strong and vibrant.

"Never," Jeff whispered.

The Outcast of Cliff City

By
**JOHN A.
SAXON**



He saw Butch with the gunny sack. . . .



That construction gang payroll was mighty tempting to a man like Engine-Fireman Mike Garrison—a man who had been law-hounded out of every honest job he got!



MIKE GARRISON dumped the grates of the wheezy little eight wheeler locomotive, used what steam was left in the boiler to move the engine another twenty-five feet up the siding. Then he climbed out of the cab, took the scoop from the tender and shoveled the hot embers off the ties into the sand beside the right-of-way of the K. P. Railroad.

Dan Jennings, the engineer of the work-train engine had already swung down the right side and tramped up the newly laid road-bed toward the six-months' old construction town of Cliff City, a sprawling array of shacks and false-fronts that were already showing signs of the weathering of the Kansas wind.

Mike straightened his aching body. To-

morrow it would be the same thing over again. Back breaking work this keeping two hundred men supplied with ties and rails as the track-gangs forged the twin bands of steel ever westward. The construction crews lived in bunkhouses made of boxcars that were moved forward night by night to railroad, as the laying of the track progressed.

Mike tossed the scoop back into the tender, pulled his hat down over his eyes. The sand-laden wind that swept the prairie had come up with the setting sun. It would continue to blow throughout the night.

The little town of Cliff City looked bleak and deserted in the early evening shadows. The saloons wouldn't do much business until tomorrow, which was pay-day. The end-of-the-line gang would come swarming into town for twenty-four hours of carousing, gambling, fighting. On Monday morning the whole thing would start over again, each man working his heart out in the blazing Kansas sun so that on the next Saturday night they could have another fling at what they called recreation.

Mike Garrison moved his head slowly from side to side as he walked along. Once, he too would have been a part of that milling, whiskey-swilling throng, tossing his money away with a reckless hand, heedless of the morrow.

But not now. Now, there was Jess to consider. Jessie, who at this moment was waiting supper for him in the little shack they had rented at the edge of town. He had Jess to think of now, and soon there would be a child.

He flexed his aching fingers trying to stretch the pain from them. It was hard work, this job; back breaking muscle wrenching effort that left him lame and exhausted at night.

But it was work—something that had been denied him too many times for him to complain, and he was glad that he could do it—glad that he had it to do. Not only on his own account, but because of Jess. She had gone through a lot with him in the last two years and she had been a thoroughbred about it. It had been pretty hard for her, always moving before they'd really got settled in a place—always living in constant fear that some day . . .

He swung off the roadbed now to go around the rough building that served as a

station. On the upper floor were the offices of the trainmaster, the superintendent and the dispatcher. As he walked across the board platform, the telegraph operator came down from the dispatcher's office. He had a green shade over his eyes and his shirt sleeves were covered with black saten protectors, held in place by rubber bands above his elbows.

"Hi yuh, Mike?" he greeted the fireman without any particular friendliness in his voice. "Old Man Jason wants to see you."

The operator walked on, but Mike Garrison stood as though an icy blast from the Arctic had frozen him into immobility. His tall, thin-hipped body went rigid and his hands, knotted and gnarled by toil, tightened into balls. His bony face seemed to change color in the flickering rays of the kerosene lamp fastened against the wall. Instead of the sunburned brown that was his natural color, a pall of grayness drenched his features.

Not again! Five weeks this time and now—

Gradually the stiffness went out of his body and he swayed a little. Then, like a man who has heard the pronouncement of doom, but forces himself to meet it, he dragged his leaden feet toward the door on which was a roughly lettered sign that read: *Superintendent*.

Twice his trembling hand reached for the knob of the door before he could make his fingers close around the white china ball and turn the latch.

He fumbled at his hat when he went in, finally pulled it from his rust colored hair and stood, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

The dark, fat-faced, little man who sat at the desk across the room, looked up momentarily, then turned his eyes back to the papers he had before him.

Mike Garrison was no coward, yet at that moment a nameless fear coursed through his body like a creeping palsy.

"You—wanted to see me—Mr. Jason?"

As though realizing for the first time the presence of the man he had looked straight at a moment before, Jason swung around, staring at Garrison through leveled, mask-like eyes.

"I sent for you, Mike," Jason said, and his voice was as flat as the floor under his feet.

MIKE GARRISON took a deep breath and waited, as a felon stands before a court of justice awaiting sentence. His lips moved but no sound came from them. Mike Garrison, who for years had feared neither God nor man, was uttering a silent prayer: "Please, God, for Jessie's sake—not—again—"

"Garrison," the superintendent said, "you've been working for the K. P. for a little over a month. You've made us a good man but—"

This was it, Mike thought. This was what he had feared. His jaws set tightly.

"But—" the superintendent repeated, and in the momentary pause that preceded the use of the word a second time, Mike Garrison lived a whole lifetime—"railroads are run by certain rules. Sometimes they don't seem fair—but I don't make them. What was your business before you hired out to us as a fireman? Your application says 'no experience'."

"That's right," Mike gulped. "I've never done any railroading before."

"What did you do?"

"Worked with cattle mostly."

"Where?"

"Different places. Up in Nebraska. Down on the 'strip'."

Jason shook his head. "It's no use, Mike. I've got it all down here." He tapped the papers in front of him. "Listen! 'Mike Garrison, born and raised near Nacogdoches, Texas. Cattlehand. Should be about twenty-seven. Ran with the Wild Bunch when he was eighteen. Reputedly a member of the Butch Carnahan gang. At twenty was arrested for bank robbery, Sweetwater, Texas. Served three years. Married and left the state two years ago. No present charge against him, but should be regarded with caution, account of past record.'"

Jason folded the paper and put it down again on his desk.

"I'm sorry, Mike," he said, slowly, "but with this information before me I'll have to let you out. Suppose something happened around here? You'd be under immediate suspicion—"

"I understand, Mr. Jason," Garrison said. "I'm not blaming you any."

Jason cleared his throat. "I'll have your money for you tomorrow, Mike. The agent has gone home for the night—"

He looked at Garrison for a long moment, but there seemed to be a film over Mike's eyes and his glance did not meet that of Jason.

In the next room, the telegraph instruments clattered their metal-tongue messages. Jason raised his voice: "Harry!" he called, "Bring me the train-sheet. I want to see how Number 18 is doing."

A man walked in, avoided looking at Garrison, and laid a big sheet of ruled paper covered with figures in front of the superintendent.

Jason busied himself with the sheet. After a long time he heard the door open and close. It was as though the sound of the door was a signal he had been waiting for. He stood up, slammed his cigar into a sand-covered wooden box. Then he enunciated a heart-felt, "damn!" and walked over to the window and stared out through the dirty glass into the night. It wasn't that he could see anything. He couldn't. He wasn't trying to.

Out in the darkness, Mike Garrison walked slowly toward his home. It wasn't, he told himself, fiercely, that he cared about himself. It was his wife—Jess. Soon there would be doctor bills, expenses—and the last two years hadn't been kind to her. He had dragged her from pillar to post, always two jumps ahead of that black cloud that was repeatedly swirling up from Texas, the tornado of his own past, to wreck his plans as fast as he could rebuild them. Nobody wanted an ex-convict.

They didn't know that Mike Garrison hadn't had anything to do with the robbery of the Sweetwater bank. He hadn't even been with the bunch that night—but he hadn't been able to prove it. The others had gotten clean away, but Mike, not even knowing what Butch and the others had planned that night, had been impaled by his own record.

He steeled himself to go into the little house, hoped that he could keep Jess from learning what had happened. Just for a little while—just until he could think this out. This was to have been their last stand. This had been their last hope. There was nothing left.

Jessie heard his footsteps on the porch, ran to open the door for him, kissed him shyly, as she always did.

"Mike! You're late tonight. And I've

fixed everything you like for supper. Hurry up and wash, dear. Everything's ready."

He walked through the kitchen and out to the wash-bench back of the house, grateful for the darkness that helped him hide the torturing thoughts that were racing through his mind.

He couldn't lie to Jess. He never had. She'd know, somehow, and he dreaded that moment.

He dawdled at the basin as long as he dared, then went back into the kitchen.

Jess, busy with getting the meal onto the table, didn't look up. He was given another moment of respite.

He watched her slender form as she dished things up; her dark hair coiled low on the nape of her neck as she always wore it; the ivory whiteness of her skin that no desert wind could blemish; the clean smell of her freshly laundered gingham dress.

"Ready, dear," she said finally. "Sit down."

He slid his lanky length into the rough chair and waited with bowed head for Jess to say the simple Grace she had always pronounced at every meal since their marriage.

"—and for the blessing that Thou has provided for us, Oh Lord, we thank Thee—"

A hard lump came into the throat of Mike Garrison. Blessings! Cursed by being driven from place to place like a hounded animal.

He helped Jess to the food, placed some on his own plate. He tried to eat but somehow he couldn't.

He hesitated to raise his eyes to those of his wife for he sensed that she was not eating herself; that she was watching him.

At last she said: "Mike. Something's wrong. Oh, Mike, has—has it happened—again?"

He nodded his head, knowing that his voice would break if he tried to speak.

"Mike. I—I'm sorry, dear."

He reached across the small table and patted her arm, clumsily, then forced words to his lips. "It's no use, Jess. They always catch up with us. We can't go on this way forever. Soon there will be three of us—"

Her sympathy was quick, warmly defensive as always of the man she loved.

"I know," she said softly. "It doesn't

seem fair. You made a mistake. You paid your debt to society as society demanded, and it was for something you didn't do. Now they're making you pay it over and over—"

He could tell she was holding back the tears and a torment of anger seethed within him.

"It'll always be this way, Jess," he protested. "I never killed a man in my life. What I took, I took from those who could afford to lose it; from those who in their turn had taken from others. Not that that is any justification. But I paid for my mistakes—paid by serving my time for something I didn't do . . . but for which I was as guilty, in a way, as though I actually had."

"I understand, dear," Jess said softly, and her voice was low and soothing. "We've been hounded from place to place for two years."

"Four different ranches," he said bitterly. "They had no place for a man with a record. Fifteen years ago it wouldn't have made any difference. But the West is changing. As a matter of history, the bad man is a hero. As a matter of present day consideration—he is an outcast."

"But you're *not* a bad man, Mike Garrison," Jess protested.

"Thanks, Jess," Mike said, his voice breaking a little. "But because you married me, you're tarred with the same brush."

He stood up, his food untouched. "Jess," he said tightly. "I—I'm going downtown."

Her face paled a little and he knew what had flashed into her mind.

"No," he assured her, "it isn't that. I've taken my last drink of whiskey—ever. I promised, and I'll keep that promise. It's—just that I've got to think, and I want to be where there's noise and excitement. Where people don't give a damn what's going to happen tomorrow."

Jessie's eyes were a little misty, but her chin was firm.

"I understand, Mike. I'll wait up for you. Don't be too late."

He avoided her eyes and left her.

HE slogged through the dust of Cliff City's one street, turned in at the Rail-head saloon. He hadn't been in a saloon for a long time. The smell of liquor; the tobacco smoke spiraling upward

to form flat blue layers around the swinging kerosene lamps; the click of chips at the gambling tables; the discordant notes of a tin-panny piano—it all surged over him to stir a strange feeling of nostalgia for the past.

He made his way to the bar, ordered a beer.

"Howdy, Mike," the bartender said, and Mike thought there was a strained quality in the greeting. "First time I've seen you *inside* since you hit town."

Mike knew without being told, that the barkeeper had heard it. Bartenders are usually the first to hear such things in a town like Cliff City.

"Uh-huh," Mike answered, noncommittally.

"Not much of a crowd tonight," the barman offered, making conversation. "She'll be lively enough tomorrow night after the pay-car arrives. The boys will all be in to celebrate."

So they would, Mike thought. But there would be no celebration for him. Tomorrow would be his last payday and then—

He wiped the beer-foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Three guys in here tonight looking for you," the bartender went on. "Tough looking *hombres*, too. Don't see many men these days packing guns, unless they come up from Texas."

Mike looked up quickly, wondering if there was any hidden innuendo in what the man had said. But the bartender was polishing a glass and not looking at Mike.

"Yeah?" Mike agreed. "What did they look like?"

"Like I said, tough *hombres*. Rode in about sundown. Looked like they'd been traveling hard. One of them was a bushy-haired gent with a triangle scar on his right cheek. Could have been made by a burn. One of the others was small and chunky. Third one was tall and thin. Had yellow hair. They asked for you, but I said I didn't think you'd come in off the job yet. They seemed to be in a hell of a hurry. Had their drink, forked their horses and rode off. Went east. Know 'em?"

Mike laid down a coin for the beer, turned away. "No," he lied.

He did know them. He should. He knew how Butch Carnahan had gotten that scar. He had been there when it happened.

He walked out into the street. The Wild Bunch. Asking for him. Why?

He took a quick breath. They had ridden east. They had been in a hurry.

Now he knew why Jason had asked about Number 18. Number 18 was pulling the pay-car. Twenty thousand dollars! Twenty thousand dollars to be gambled and squandered and drunk up tomorrow night.

He held his watch under the light of a flickering oil street lamp, Cliff City's one bid to cosmopolitanism. It was five minutes after nine. Number 18 was due in at midnight. There was only one logical place for what he thought Carnahan had in mind and that was at Swift Water draw, twenty miles east.

No wonder Butch Carnahan and the others had been in a hurry. If *that* was what they planned, it meant they'd have to ride like the devil to make it by the round-about trail they would have to follow.

For a long time Garrison stood staring into the darkness, looking toward the east.

Twenty thousand dollars! He knew how they'd work it. Slim would cover the engineer after they flagged the train. Shorty would stay off at the side of the track to cover Butch while he robbed the paycar. Butch would pass the loot to Shorty, who would ride to the west where they had stashed two horses. Butch and Slim would uncouple the engine, run it west to where they had left the horses, jump off, order the engineer to reverse direction and start back toward the train, firing a few shots to keep him going.

Oh, he knew how they would work it all right, because he knew Butch Carnahan's methods.

His breath quickened. Twenty thousand dollars. Enough to keep himself and Jess and the child comfortable some place so far away the fetid breath of his Texas record could never reach them.

And for two or three minutes, Shorty would be alone with the money!

If he could just get there in time. . . . Butch would pass the sack to Shorty. . . . Shorty would start for his horse. . . . A gun barrel laid across Shorty's head—and nobody, neither the Wild Bunch or anybody else would ever know what had happened!

He could do it if he could get there in time—but how?

THE wind! It was blowing steadily from the west at thirty miles an hour.

The push-car at the end of the station siding. The one the straw-boss used. When the wind was strong and in the right direction they had a sail-like arrangement of canvas that they used to ease their work of pushing the four wheeled car by hand.

He hurried his steps. If Jess was asleep—if she just hadn't waited up for him. She wouldn't think anything about his being late.

He slipped off his boots outside the door and opened it carefully. He crept inside, his stockinged feet making no sound.

Luck! Jess was asleep on the bed, her arm flung out, half pillowing her head. The light was burning low.

Poor kid. She had cried herself to sleep.

Carefully he lifted the lid of the trunk in the corner, shoved his hand down deep and brought out a .45 Colt in a well-worn holster, hung from a weather stained belt. It had been years since he had felt that black-butted gun against his thigh.

A slight shiver ran through him although the night was warm. He slid silently out of the room, closed the door carefully, picked up his boots, and ran.

In the room he had just quitted, the dark-haired girl sat bolt upright, staring at the square shadow of the door.

"Oh, Mike, Mike!" she sobbed brokenly. "And I thought—"

She buried her face in her arms and cried, her whole body shaking convulsively.

Outside, Mike stopped just long enough to put on and fasten his boots. Then he ran toward the railroad tracks.

It was dark in the tool-house and the push-car was hard for one man to handle alone. A hundred yards away the yellow lights of the station showed against the darkness in amber squares. The wind from the west was holding strong.

He got the car onto the tracks, shoved it along until he came to the main line switch, and lifted the wheels over the points. Once the car was rolling, he put up the make-shift sail. It belled out and the push-car moved faster, ever faster, toward the east.

At the bridge over Swift Water draw, he braked the car to a stop, lifted it from the rails and shoved it off the trestle. He heard it crash below.

He went on to the place where he figured

the robbery would take place, concealed himself in the rocks. For an hour he crouched there, cold perspiration standing in beads on his forehead.

Somewhere in the distance he heard the sound of horses. He flattened himself, scarcely daring to breathe.

There they were! Even in the poor light he could recognize them. Butch, Shorty, Slim!

From afar the whistle of the west bound train came, its strident note knifing against the wind. Then the flash of a match as Butch lighted the red lantern. Slim would take the lantern, Butch would wait in the shadows. Shorty came into the rocks and crouched so close Mike could almost have touched him. A dozen feet away he heard the stomp of a tethered horse.

To Mike Garrison the next few minutes seemed an eternity. Like a man in a daze he watched every step of the hold-up. He saw Butch run toward the right side of the track with the gunny sack, toss it in Shorty's direction. He saw Shorty pick it up and come back toward the horse.

Steady now, Mike. Not over the head. Shorty's hat would break the force of the blow. Hold the gun barrel flat, strike under the edge of the brim and across the temple. . . .

Now!

Shorty crumpled at his feet. Mike was scarcely breathing now. He holstered the gun quickly, stepped over the prostrate form and picked up the sack.

Twenty thousand dollars!

FOR a moment, exultation swept over him in a warm wave. No more constantly moving on, always fearful of what would come up from the south—a letter—a word—somebody who remembered.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the exultation left and he was face to face with stark reality. He could almost hear Jessie's words. "It's no good, Mike. No man can enjoy that which he has not come by honestly."

He looked at the silent man at his feet. Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps now he was a killer. No, that man was alive, breathing.

He was wasting time. He had to get away, quickly. He heard the clank of the coupling.

Then with a muttered curse he picked up the sack, ran across to the open door of the pay-car and tossed the money inside.

Somewhere up the track he heard the sound of shots.

He found the horse, flung himself into the saddle.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Mike Garrison abandoned the horse at the edge of Cliff City and hurried to his home. He walked in, tip-toeing carefully. The light was still burning but the chimney was smoking. He blew it out, eased down gently on the bed.

She stirred, sleepily.

"Is—everything all right—Mike?"

"Everything is all right, Jess."

For a long time Mike Garrison stared at a ceiling he couldn't see. Yes, he thought, everything was all right. Tomorrow they'd have to move on again—perhaps again—and again—but they'd make out somehow. Some day there'd be three of them, but now he'd never have to be afraid to look into the eyes of that child.

Finally, he slept. . . .

Mike Garrison showed up at the station the next morning to get his pay. Jason was waiting for him.

"Suppose you heard about the holdup last night, Garrison?" the superintendent asked.

"Yes," Mike answered.

"Something funny about it. Three men

showed up here last night. They were killed during that holdup. Two were shot by the engineer, the third by the conductor, while he was trying to escape. The third man had been buffaloed by a gun barrel over his head. They were all part of the old Butch Carnahan gang."

"Uh huh," Mike said.

"Wait a minute. There was a fourth man I'm told. A man who ran out of the brush and threw the money *back* into the pay-car. Of course the sheriff isn't interested. The robbers were killed and the money recovered—thanks to that fourth man, whoever he was."

"Can I get my money now?" Mike asked, flatly.

"You'll have to go to the pay-car for it. You're still on the payroll. I got to thinking things over last night and I figure you are entitled to live down your record, Mike. You'd better get some steam into that old tea-kettle. They want to use her."

Mike Garrison could hardly trust himself to ask: "Will I have time to go back to my house first?"

"Sure," said Jason, and smiled at Mike.

Superintendent Jason stared at the foot-print where Mike had been standing. The heel plate of the boot had made an indentation in the sand exactly like that he had found at the scene of the holdup.

Jason had known for an hour who that fourth man had been.

"TEXAS GUNS — NOT FOR HIRE!"

Like any cowman, Pat Casteel hated nothing so much as he hated sheep on a cattle-range—unless it was that bunch of night-riding killers who never gave a young cowboy, doomed to the bitter job of tending woollies, a chance to go for his gun!

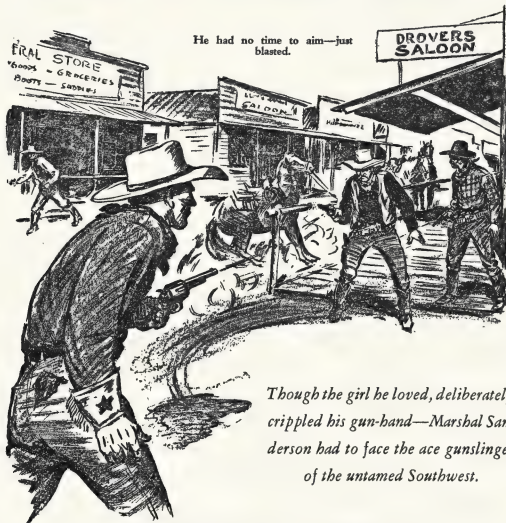
You'll like this rip-smashing novel of Walt Coburn's, featured in the May issue of *Star Western*—along with five other forceful long stories of the Old West, by Les Savage, jr., Tom Roan, William R. Cox, Harry Olmsted and William Heuman!

Buy your copy of this famous man-sized all-novel magazine today at your newsstand! On sale everywhere now!



STAR WESTERN
ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Town of Sudden Death



Though the girl he loved, deliberately crippled his gun-hand—Marshal Sanderson had to face the ace gunslinger of the untamed Southwest.

By MORGAN LEWIS

THE knife went into the table with a dull tunk and stood straight up, the bone haft quivering. Despite the sudden, red-hot flame of pain as the blade sank through meat and sinew it took a half second for Miles Sanderson to realize that his hand was pinned to the table top, his gun-hand—and that Julia Caruth had done it.

She stood across from him, a woman straight and bright as the keen blade she had just wielded. "I have just saved your soul, Miles," she said. Through the agony of her

white face he could read the clear, shining purpose in her eyes.

The blade through his hand became a slim sliver of white heat. He set his jaw and put his hand to the bone haft. He tugged once, sharply, and the knife came free, bright crimson staining the point. Blood welled from the back of his hand and from the palm to drip onto the unwanted wood and collect in little pools.

Miles Sanderson deliberately lifted his mind to a high, remote point where he could

view his maimed hand with detachment, almost as though the blood and the pain belonged to another person. He put the knife on the table and from force of long habit his fingers touched the star badge pinned to his soft shirt. His gray eyes came up and fastened on the girl's dark ones and without words her reasoning and motives were plain as the prairie lying bright and clear under the blue-white flash of lightning.

They stood silently while unspoken communication flowed between them. He moved his hand from the table, letting it fall at his side and the dark blood ran in irregular lines down his fingers and dropped to the floor with a soft, faint thud.

The girl's eyes dropped to it and despite her stern resolve her full lower lip quivered.

Miles turned and walked to the corner of the kitchen. He picked up the turpentine can and tilted the spout, letting the clear liquid run into his cupped palm, holding his hand steady against the fiery sting. He heard the girl moving about behind him and when he turned back to the table she had laid out soft white bandages.

He sat on a straight backed kitchen chair and her fingers were cool and capable on his hand as she fashioned compresses and bound them in place with strips of cloth. She finished and her head bent low while her lips touched his wrist above the bandage.

Miles gazed down at the smooth black hair bound in shining braids around her head and felt no rancor, only a sad understanding pity. She was a woman fighting desperately for her happiness with any weapon at her command. By the lengths to which she had gone he could measure her love for him and his sadness was because she had failed.

Julia raised her head and her eyes held a misty brightness. "Now you can turn in your badge—no one will blame you."

His eyes were steady on her as his mind turned, trying to soften the blow, trying to find a way to make her understand. He had to make her see that a man had a job to do whether it was town marshal or punching cattle and a man couldn't run out on his job. He had to stick with it taking the bitter with the sweet, the hard, dangerous part of it as well as the pleasant and easy—or else he was only half a man.

The ten years he had held office passed through his mind with the swiftness of a flowing stream. He remembered the first man he had killed, spacing the two swift bullets so closely that a silver dollar would have covered both holes with room to spare.

He remembered the sadness that had come over him as he had looked down at that young face relaxed in death. The man hadn't been much of a gunman, just a waddie gone wrong and taken to riding the owlhoot. But others had followed who had been quick on the trigger and Miles Sanderson's fame had grown and spread, reaching out across the range, into the hills and the mountains where hard-eyed, lustful men rode the shadowed owlhoot trails.

Without desire or ambition on his part he had become a symbol, a shining target at which men unlimbered their guns in an attempt, with one deadly bullet, to gain the fame and prestige of having out-drawn the marshal of Sulphur Flats. And so they had come, irregularly spaced through the years. From men who had almost attained the gun stature of Moss Alloway to wild youngsters spurred on and made reckless by too much red-eye.

Miles was no born killer; he did a job and he kept his town clean. When opportunity offered he crippled his man rather than kill him but, in a tight, when the chips were down, he shot to kill. So far he had never missed.

The girl was regarding him steadily, striving to read the thoughts locked behind his hooded eyes, almost as though his long silence had given her a premonition of what was to come.

MILES raised his glance to the tall black rifle that hung over the mantle. Beneath it was the powder horn and pouch of bullets that had been the girl's father's only defence against enemies both brute and human. Below was the huge, blackened fireplace with its swinging crane and the now disused iron kettle; for Jake Caruth had come west when the country was still wild and raw and eternal vigilance was the price of safety.

Miles spoke slowly, trying to make the girl see the hard reality of the picture. "What would have happened to your daddy and his family if he'd decided he'd had enough fightin' and hung up his gun?"

"That was different," she said swiftly. "Those were wild times. He had to fight or be butchered by the Indians."

"Not so different," Miles pointed out. "He could have pulled up stakes and gone back to the settlements where life was easy. He didn't have to stay and fight it out." He paused and added reminiscently, "But he did stay and he survived to die decently in bed with his boots off."

He looked down at his hand through which pain throbbed with every beat of his heart. Julia sat with her eyes fixed on him while silence flowed in around them and as realization came to her the color began to ebb from lip and cheek.

"Does that mean you're going out to meet Moss Alloway?" Her voice was a trifle unsteady in spite of her effort to keep it even.

Miles stood up and reaching his left hand over to his holster he pulled the gun loose and shoved it down inside his waistband where he could get at it with a left-handed draw.

That was his answer—she knew it was final and irrevocable.

She stood up, slim and straight before him. The knowledge of failure put bitter lines about her long, full lips and shadowed her eyes with a foretaste of heartbreak. She swayed forward to him and placed both palms against his chest. Her voice was deep and low with a fierce urgency.

"Don't go, Miles—for years this man Alloway has haunted my dreams. You've done enough. We'll be married now and go away. No one will blame you. . . ." Her voice trailed off into a whisper and her head dropped until it rested against him.

Miles raised his good hand and let it move softly over her black hair. "You see how it is," he said gently. "A man has to take the bad part of the job along with the good. Moss Alloway has come into town and made his brag that he's goin' to find out what kind of a leather slapper they have raised in Sulphur Flats." His voice hardened and a note of finality crept into it. "I'll either kill him and that will end it or he will kill me and then he'll be boss. There is no other way."

The girl pushed away from him. She dropped wearily into a seat and rested her elbows on the table's scarred top and looked at him.

"All along I have known this was the way it would be," she said in a dreary, beaten voice. "I have tried to get you to turn in your badge, for the shadow of Moss Alloway has been looming larger and larger and I knew sooner or later you two would have to meet. Now he will kill you, but I will be the one who has murdered you. . . . I ruined your gun-hand."

"It's all in the cards," Miles said quietly. "A man can't die before his time."

"If, by some miracle, you happen to survive this meeting," she went on as though he had not spoken, "you'll get to be like all the rest of them. You'll keep on killing until finally you'll have to have your man for breakfast or the day won't be right for you."

Miles' glance was intent upon her. "You think I kill for the fun of it?"

"Not now," Julia answered dully, "but you will. Look what the job has done for you!" she cried with a sudden burst of vehemence. "You act as though you had eyes in the back of your head. You distrust every living soul. You've become wary and cold-eyed like the whole warped breed of gunmen! Soon you'll have nothing left but your pride—then you'll kill just to satisfy it!" She covered her eyes with her palm. "Every time I see you go out, not knowing if you'll come back alive—it's like a knife through my heart."

Miles pressed his hand over the bandage to still the pain and his eyes were compassionate. "My hand may never be right again for fast work," he said slowly as though musing. "If I get by Alloway and then was to turn in my badge—would that satisfy you?"

A wild flash of hope showed in the girl's eyes and as quickly died. "It's what I've been praying for—but it can never be," she said hopelessly. "No man can stand in front of Moss Alloway and live. You might have had a chance—but I ruined it for you."

A man's shadow passed the window and knuckles rapped the door. "Come in!" Miles said and slipped the injured hand beneath his coat.

Truman Walters, Mayor of Sulphur Flats came through the doorway. He was medium tall and fat and sweat was running down his round, red face. He mopped at it with a soiled bandanna as he spoke.

"Somethin' has got to be done, Miles!

"Alloway has got the town spooked. There ain't a soul on the streets. He's down at the Drover's with Spider McCauley and he's makin' talk that if you don't show up he's comin' after you." He added doubtfully, "You want some help?"

Miles shook his head. "I reckon not, Truman. You get along and I'll be down there shortly."

The Mayor of Sulphur Flats sighed visibly with relief and backed out the doorway.

The girl looked up at Miles. "Why didn't you let him get some men to help you?"

He shrugged. "Alloway's too fast—he'd be bound to kill somebody before they stopped him. It's better this way. Besides, it's my job."

He walked to the door and paused. "I don't blame you for this," he raised his injured hand, "I see what you were after. Maybe it'll turn out good after all."

He went out leaving the girl seated at the table with black despair in her eyes.

MAIN STREET of Sulphur Flats was dead and deserted for its whole dusty length. As Miles came upon it the sun struck down at him with a hot, almost tangible pressure. He walked down the plank walk a few doors to his office next to the jail and went in, closing the door behind him.

He took off his coat and hung it carefully over the back of a chair. He broke his gun and slipped in the sixth shell and snapped it together and spun the cylinder. It worked smoothly and he shoved it back inside his waistband. He picked up a heavy gauntlet glove from the desk and worked it on his hand over the bandage. It was uncomfortable but it concealed his injury.

He shuffled through the dodgers on the desk until he came to two, for Alloway and Spider McCauley. He had never seen either man but he would know them from their pictures and from verbal descriptions he had received. He left the office going out into the full blast of heat, the Colt making an unaccustomed pressure against his belly.

He passed along the plank walk, noting the unusual silence and the absence of towns people. It came to him then that his passage along the street was much like the final journey every man had eventually to make, marching out alone through the dim portal of human experience into the great unknown

with never a friend at his elbow for help or companionship.

The white face of Mrs. Goss stared at him from the window of her tiny shop. Further on, Ed Lang, standing inside the closed door of his store, widened his eyes at sight of the glove. Miles' lips tightened and he passed on, his boots beating up echoes against the false fronted buildings. For the last ten years, summer and winter, his right hand had been bare. Now with that hand useless he was just like any man of ordinary ability going up against a gunman whose speed was a by-word throughout the west.

Miles shook his head a trifle, shaking off these thoughts and bringing to mind all that he had heard of Alloway. The gunman was a cross-draw man, using a Frontier model with the trigger filed off, fanning the hammer with his thumb. It was said of him that he could hold out a poker chip at shoulder level on his gun hand; drop it, draw his gun and fire three shots before the chip hit the floor.

Down at the next corner the green wooden awning of the Drover's Saloon extended across the walk forming a rectangle of shade. Two cowponies stood hip-shot at the hitching rail, heads dropped low under the sun's beating. Heat quivered the air above the road and a dust devil wheeled slowly around the corner and collapsed as though exhausted by its effort.

Memories of past gunfights beat through the marshal's mind as the scarred planking passed beneath his boots. He had gone into them coolly and deliberately, proud of the star on his chest, confident of his ability. A stray doubt touched his mind; if things hadn't turned out like this would he have gone on until he became a confirmed killer, until the duties of his job became lost in the fierce desire to match speed with another man?

He shook his head. He didn't think so but he could never be sure. Owning a fast draw did funny things to a man. In a way it made him God-like for it gave him the power to take life; it was apt to fill him too full of his own importance, for it made him at once judge, jury and executioner. And then there was always the nagging, challenging doubt; would the next touted gunman prove to be faster on the draw than he? And with this doubt, as its running mate,

came the surging, driving impulse to beat down the other man with gunfire.

A man came out into the spot of shade fifty feet ahead of him and stepped quickly back into the Drover's. When Miles was twenty feet from the awning the batwings pushed open and two men stepped out and wheeled to face him.

MOSS ALLOWAY was a personable man. A good six feet tall, his big body was moulded with muscle. Straw colored hair was combed down over his ears and the points of a tawny moustache trailed past the corners of his mouth. His face was weathered to the color of saddle leather and his eyes were startling in their brilliant blueness. His nose curved out in a great, thin beak and though only in his late twenties, there was an air of cold confidence and power about him.

The man on his far side, Spider McCauley, was squat, black and hairy, with the look of an ill-tempered tomcat. An air of sour viciousness hung over him.

Looking at Alloway, Miles knew that here was a man who, whatever his beginnings, had let pride in his gunplay crowd out everything else in life. From the quick gleam in his eyes as he measured the marshal it was plain that he had long since ceased to find excuse for his killing; the act in itself was the beginning and the end for Moss Alloway.

Miles stopped just under the awning so that its overhang shaded his eyes from the sun's white glare. Yesterday when the news had come that Alloway was heading for Sulphur Flats he had pictured the meeting a dozen different ways but never like this. His gloved hand hung at his side and Alloway's quick eyes flicked down to it and back to his face.

"Unfasten your gunbelts!" Miles said evenly. "You're under arrest!"

Alloway stood absolutely without motion for a split second, a wild, hawk-like look upon his face, his body tense as a coiled spring. Then he moved and the sound of his hand striking leather startled the street's stillness. At the break, Miles took one quick step sideways but he never saw Alloway draw. His own gun was just clearing his waistband when a Colt's deep throated roar split the silence and a slug bit deep into him, rocking him to his heels, driving him part-

way around. Numbed by the shock he saw Alloway with his gun straight out before him, thumbing back the hammer for another shot. The barrel with a wisp of smoke trailing from it looked as big as a cannon.

Without being conscious of it he pulled up his gun and fired, heedless of aim.

The breath of Alloway's second shot whistled close by his cheek—and then Alloway was tossing his gun in a short arc from right hand to left in the borderman's shift, and where his thumb had been was only a bloody stump.

In that brief instant of time while the gun was in the air lay Miles' only chance of survival, given to him by a freak shot that had torn off Alloway's thumb. He brought up his injured hand to support his failing arm and shot twice at that target so close that even his untutored left hand could not miss.

The gun fell into Alloway's suddenly nerveless fingers and slipped through to the ground. Alloway's mouth fell open and his whole face loosened with a sure knowledge of death. He swayed with his feet spread far apart, his legs buckled and he went forward, without strength to lift his hands, to hit full on his face.

Spider McCauley had been brought along simply to guard Alloway's rear, not to get into the fight. He had been standing with his back half turned. At the sound of Alloway's body striking the boards he swung about and utter disbelief came into his dark face.

Miles took two straining steps and leaned back against the awning post, his arms hanging limply. Spider shot one evil glance at him and his hand snapped to his hip. It never came up; a blast like a ten pounder thundered in back of him and Spider McCauley was slammed to earth as though hit by a thunderbolt.

Beyond him, at the corner of the building, Julia was flat on her back, her father's big old muzzle loader sprawled across her body.

Men came out into the street, cautiously at first and then with assurance. They helped Julia to her feet and took Miles by the arms and helped him over to a seat on the Drover's steps.

Doctor Crossley pushed through the gathering crowd. He took a quick look at Alloway and went on to drop to his knees beside

(Please continue on page 114)

Johnny's Bullet Bonanza

Johnny tried to drag him
out of the fire. . . .



By
JOSEPH CHADWICK



His days of life already numbered, young Johnny Chance taunted Death in a desperation battle—to wipe the stain of the owlhoot from his name.



JOHNNY CHANCE'S life had only seamy sides, and now that it was petering out he yearned for strange things. He wanted to hang up his guns. He wanted to stop drifting along dark trails and settle down. Somehow, his old wildness was gone.

"It ain't that I got religion," he kept telling himself. "I just hanker to live my few remainin' days in peace."

Johnny was all of twenty years old, and

grimly in earnest. But the night he rode into Outpost, there in Old Washoe, his good intentions were creaky at the joints.

He put his roan horse up at the livery, not knowing how the bill would be paid, come morning, or where he himself would sleep. He hadn't a dollar to his name, and his belly, not understanding, growled from neglect. Walking dispiritedly along the street, he had his eye caught by a cafe window. He halted, assailed by the fragrance of food a-cooking. He could see diners within, stuffing themselves. Johnny's mouth watered. A voice said, "Hungry, Johnny?"

The kid turned, and searched his memory. The burly man who had come up behind him bore the unmistakable stamp of a hard-case. His face was dark and flabby, with heavy jowls, and his eyes were a muddy brown. Johnny remembered. Pete Durango, gunhawk.

"Me and grub are total strangers, Pete."

"I'll stake you to a meal, kid." Durango took a silver dollar from his pocket and flipped it to Johnny. "More where it came from."

Johnny's eyes flickered. "How do I come by some of it?"

Pete Durango jerked his head. "Come along," he said.

They crossed the street, walked past the stage company's office, then entered the Trail Hotel. Durango nodded to the fat proprietor behind the desk. He led the way up the narrow stairs and along an unlighted hall. He opened a door. "Step in," he invited.

An oil lamp, turned low, stood on a center table and made a pattern of light and shadows in the room. A gaunt-faced man lay fully dressed on the bed. A quirly cigarette hung limp from the man's lips. He pushed his hat back off his eyes, and Johnny saw that it was the outlaw Boot Lynch. A sudden scowl blackened Lynch's face.

"You ain't picked him, Pete?" the outlaw growled. "Hell, it'd be like ridin' with a dead man. This kid is bad luck!"

"He can use a gun," Durango said. "He's faster than you and me together." He poured a drink from a whiskey bottle on the table and handed the glass to Johnny. "Have a drink, kid. I'll pick you up."

Johnny drank, choked a little, and felt the

fiery liquor take hold in his empty stomach. He leaned against the wall, waiting for what was to come, but Durango had taken a chair and Boot Lynch still lay idle. The minutes dragged by, and standing brought that little stitch of pain—caused by a .44 slug embedded in his spine. He tried to ignore that pain, for it meant that he was doomed. He always shrank from thinking of what the medicos had told him; that an operation was not possible, and that at best he had but six months to live. Johnny finally said, "What is this, a wake?"

"Take another drink, kid," Durango urged. "It won't be long now."

Johnny had just downed his second drink when the door opened and quickly closed. He turned and saw a tall, well-built man. Beyond that he could tell nothing about the newcomer. The light was dim; the man was dressed in plain black and wore a neckerchief mask that covered his face up to the eyes. His eyes were obscure, shadowed by his hat brim. Johnny stared.

"You got the men, eh, Pete?" The man's voice was muffled by the mask. "You're sure of them?"

Durango rose, and Boot Lynch sat up interested.

"They're two good men," Durango said. "Boot Lynch and Johnny Chance."

"I've heard of Lynch." The marked face turned Johnny's way. "I don't know about this hombre. He looks like a kid."

"He's a wizard with a sixgun, Boss," said Pete Durango. "You heard about Jacquard gettin' killed down in Arizona. Johnny did it. I was in Signal City at the time. It was a real shoot-out. The kid don't give a hang for nothin'. He'd got a bullet in his spine, and the medicos say he's likely to keel over dead any day. He'll do."

"I'll take your word for him," The masked man's voice turned ugly. "But I want no slip-ups. You know what you're to do?"

"Sure, Boss." Durango's muddy eyes were sly and wicked. "We knock off the Virginia City stage. You can count on us."

The masked man took a leather pouch from under his coat. There was a clink of gold coins as he placed the pouch on the table. The man's hand lingered a moment in the glow of the table lamp. Johnny saw a big gold ring on the third finger, a signet

ring engraved with a horse-shoe design. Johnny would remember that ring.

"There's half your pay, a hundred dollars each," the masked man said. "You'll get the rest later—if the job is done right."

He moved back to the door, paused to look hard at each of the three men. Then, as though satisfied, he nodded jerkily, and opened the door and went out. Pete Durango grabbed the leather pouch as soon as the door closed. He began counting the money with greedy haste.

Johnny said, "Pete, I got to get some grub under my belt else I'll cave in."

"All right, kid. We'll ride out when you get back."

Johnny heard Boot Lynch mutter, behind him, "Pete, I don't like it none. That kid is bad medicine."

THE stage had just rolled into Outpost. When Johnny Chance came from the hotel, the passengers were climbing from the Concord. Johnny guessed that they would stay at the hotel over night, then start out on the last lap to Virginia City at daybreak. He guessed too that Pete Durango planned to hold up the stage late the next day, perhaps at dusk.

Johnny didn't like the idea. Durango and Boot Lynch were gunswift, and somebody on that stage was likely to get killed. The masked man was taking no risk, even though paying well for whatever it was he wanted out of the job. The money tempted Johnny. A drifter-kid could not pick up big money like that every day. He recalled that in the past he had used his guns for even less profit, but he knew he was not going to ride with those two hardcases.

"Didn't say I'd take the job," he told himself.

He spoke aloud, without knowing it. The whiskey he had taken on an empty stomach was dulling his senses. He did not realize it, but he was staggering. He did feel as though he were walking on stilts. His vision was blurred.

"Maybe I ought to warn the stage people," he muttered.

He was near the stage now, and the passengers were coming along the narrow board sidewalk. Johnny edged over, making room, but then he reeled and bumped heavily into someone. He saw that it was a woman.

"No harm done, ma'am," he said thickly, doffing his sombrero.

"Really!"

Johnny stared. The woman was young, a tall and almost arrogantly proud girl no older than himself. She was fashionably dressed in gray, and she was beautiful of face and figure. She had a wealth of golden hair. Her eyes flashed him an angry look.

"Ma'am," said Johnny, "you sure are a pretty sight!"

Suddenly, violently, a man pushed between them. He was bulky and red-faced and he carried a thick walking-stick.

"See here, you drunken saddle-bum! What do you mean, accosting my daughter? I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget!"

The walking-stick swung up and, before the kid's liquor-dulled mind realized the danger, it hit him a nasty blow on the shoulder. Johnny needed no more to bowl him over. He rolled in the dust, then tried to pick himself up. The cane struck again, alongside his head. Johnny slumped down, but now he was cold sober. He grabbed for his gun. He heard the girl cry, "No, Father—no!"

Johnny got the gun clear of its holster, but he did not get it levelled. The red-faced man had unscrewed the gold head of his cane, and now held a long narrow blade. It was swordlike. Its point pricked the kid's chest.

"Drop that gun, you unhung son, or I'll stick you sure!"

Johnny's blood ran cold at the sight of naked steel. He knew that death was not six months away now; it could be less than six seconds away. This man looked like a gentleman dude, but he was as dangerous as a rattlesnake. Johnny dropped his gun. The gun-guard from the stage came and picked it up, saying, "He won't make any more trouble, Mr. Stevens."

Mr. Stevens drew back and sheathed the ugly blade in his hollow walking-stick. "If he comes within ten feet of my daughter again, I'll kill him," he swore. "So help me, I'll kill him!"

The other stage passengers were gaping, and the girl was staring at Johnny with contempt. A vast humiliation swept through the kid. He did not pick himself up until the group had moved on. Then he muttered, "That hombre must think he owns that whole world."

"He does that," the gun-guard said, handing him his gun. "He's Judd Stevens, the owner of the Rainbow Mine. He's rich as sin, and twice as ugly. You better stay shy of him, kid."

Johnny did not hear that good advice. "I'll get even," he was saying. "Me, I'll pay him back plenty!"

Rage and hatred rekindled his wildness. He knew now that he would ride with Pete Durango and Boot Lynch. Once again Johnny Chance was at war with the world. . . .

By sundown of the next day, Johnny was not so sure. He had been beaten and humiliated, and he still hated Judd Stevens, but never before had he preyed on his fellow men. Life had been hard for him; it had kicked him around, yet even when most down on his luck he had kept his hands clean. He did not like this business of holding up a stage.

The hard-cases had picked a rocky spot on a mountain slope for the ambush. Durango was checking his guns, and Boot Lynch, grinning wolfishly, was watching the trail. Johnny was jumpy, and his back was bothering him. That stitch of pain warned him that a man soon to die should not burden his conscience.

"I ain't goin' to do it!" the kid muttered. "I just ain't!"

Boot Lynch eyed him suspiciously, and Durango said, "What's that, kid?"

"Nothin'," Johnny said, realizing all at once that he was trapped. The two gunhawks would gun him down if he tried to back out. "Nothin' at all. I was just wonderin' if the stage was comin' yet."

DUSK was thickening by the time the stage appeared. It slowed on the slope, its four horses laboring. The rocks hid the ambush trio until the Concord was opposite the ambush spot. Then Durango let out a wild yell and rode out shooting, Boot Lynch following.

The gun-guard on the box raised his shotgun; it blasted harmlessly, for Boot shot the guard through the left arm. The driver reined in his team, braked the coach, reached high. Startled cries sounded from within the stage.

Durango shouted, "Climb out reachin', folks. Take it peaceful, and nobody'll get hurt. Come on, climb out!"

The passengers obeyed. There were eight of them, all men except for Judd Stevens' daughter. She lined up with the others, her golden head held high, her manner defiant. The bulky Stevens, holding his knife-case cane, cursed violently and threatened the road agents with hanging. Johnny Chance rode up behind Durango; he had not drawn his gun.

"We're goin' to pass the hat and take up a collection," Durango mocked. "Reckon you folks will be plumb glad to contribute your valuables. Kid—" He motioned toward Johnny. "Kid, get down and do the collectin'. Don't let anybody hold out on you."

Now, it seemed, was the time to make a play. But both Durango and Boot Lynch held two cocked guns, and Johnny knew he hadn't a chance of bucking this game. He dismounted. He walked to Judd Stevens and took the man's hat. Stevens cursed him. Johnny said, "You shouldn't have cased me, Mister. You made a big mistake!"

He went along the line and the passengers deposited money, watches and jewelry in the hat. He came to the girl. She wore a gold brooch at her neck, but she made no move to hand it over. Her eyes flashed.

"Hand over your jewelry, ma'am," Johnny said.

"Thief!" the girl said contemptuously. "Highwayman!"

Johnny's pride smarted. Durango called, "Rip it off her, kid! We ain't got all night!" Johnny reached out and tore the brooch from the girl's dress. Her hand came up and slapped him across the face.

Durango and Boot Lynch let out roars of laughter.

Johnny went to his horse and mounted. He felt sick at heart. This made him a road agent. It meant that the remainder of his life, those few last months, would be spent on the owlhoot—running from the law. He took up the reins, ready to ride, but Durango and Lynch tarried with guns still leveled.

Durango's laughter was gone. He was eyeing Judd Stevens with a strange fixation. "Reckon you don't remember me, Mister Stevens," he said mockingly. "I'm the hombre who grubstaked you once, back fifteen years before you struck the Rainbow bonanza. I'm Pete Durango!"

Stevens' face sagged. "Durango!" he gasped.

"Yeah! Durango, the hombre you gun-whipped when he tried to collect on that grubstake. I swore I'd get even with you, Stevens—and this is it!"

The girl screamed as Durango's gun roared. Judd Stevens reeled back against the stage's rear wheel, a bullet in his left shoulder. It was poor shooting, but Durango was aiming for a second shot. Johnny Chance was shocked by such cold-bloodedness. Abruptly he knew Judd Stevens' death was the reason for this hold-up; the masked man back in Outpost wanted the mine owner murdered.

Johnny could not stomach such a play. He dropped the loot-filled hat and grabbed for his gun. He yelled, "Pete, hold up!" But Boot Lynch had been watching him as closely as the stage people. The outlaw's guns blazed. Johnny's sixgun exploded, and the shot lifted the gaunt-bodied Lynch right out of the saddle. Seeing him hit the ground a dead-weight, Johnny swung toward Durango.

A bullet tore through the kid's shirt and burned his chest. He answered Durango's shot with a wildly aimed bullet that missed. The hardcase swung his horse in a pin-wheeling turn to make a run for it. Johnny took aim, but he did not fire again. He could not shoot even a would-be killer in the back. A moment later Durango was lost in the darkness.

Johnny turned back and faced the stage, keeping his gun ready. But the stage people were too stunned to make a play against him. Judd Stevens was still leaning against the wheel. His daughter had her arm about him.

Johnny said, "Get the gent to Virginia City. A medico can patch him up." He motioned with his gun. "Your valuables are there on the ground. Me, I don't want them."

He turned his horse and rode toward the

rocks. He had a last glimpse of the girl. She was looking after him, amazement instead of contempt now in her eyes. The rocks hid the scene from him then. He kept the roan moving. After a mile or two, he began aware that he held something besides the reins in his left hand. He pulled up and looked. It was the Stevens girl's gold brooch. An almost tender smile played over Johnny Chance's hard face.

"She sure was the prettiest sight I ever saw," he muttered.

He pocketed the brooch, and rode on. . . .

FOR a week Johnny drifted through the gold-frenzied country about Mt. Davidson. He lent a hand at the diggings when hungry, exchanging his labors for meals of sourdough biscuits and jerky. He listened to the miners talk of the rowdy pleasures of Virginia City, and finally, forgetting that the law might want him, he headed for the mining camp.

He rode in from American Flat, up Gold Hill and the Ophir Grade, and across the divide. He came down into the town as night closed in. Virginia City was a crazy quilt of false-fronts, shacks, tents and lean-tos constructed of dry-goods boxes. It seemed about to split at the seams, so crowded was it with people. The streets were thronged; they were clogged with freight wagons, emigrant wagons and mule trains. Johnny rode in B Street, wide-eyed and marvelling.

He heard screechy music from the hurdy-gurdies, glimpsed through grimmy windows, the jammed barrooms and busy gambling tables. He was attracted like a fly to a molasses barrel.

A man could ride high, wide and handsome here—if he had his pockets full of paydirt. Johnny hadn't a cent. He hadn't come by any money since Pete Durango flipped him that dollar in Outpost. The International Hotel was just ahead. Johnny saw a familiar figure mounting the steps,

YOU'VE never read a more exciting pair of Western novels than the two in the June Big-Book Western—"Those Whiskey Creek Hell-Busters!" by Tom Roan, and "Terror Rode the Blood Moon Range" by Bob Obets. They're both book-length, both presented complete—in addition to the usual big assortment of fact and fiction by your favorite writers! Get your copy April 19th!

"Miss Stevens!" Johnny called, and swung his roan into the hitch rack. The girl had heard; she turned and regarded him narrowly as he came up to her. "I brought you this pin, ma'am," he said, taking the brooch from his pocket and handing it to her. "I took it with me by mistake that night. Me, I ain't no thief."

Louise Stevens looked at the brooch, then back at Johnny's face. After a long silence, she said, "Tell me your name."

Johnny told her.

She said, "I think you're honest. Would you want a job?"

"Sure, ma'am, sure!"

"Then come with me."

She led the way into the hotel and up the stairs to a second-floor room. She knocked and Judd Stevens' arrogant voice told her to enter. Johnny followed her in and saw the mine owner sitting up in bed, his left arm in a sling.

Another man was in the room, a tall and darkly handsome man in a fancy checked suit. He was smoking a cigar and standing in the center of the room with his thumbs hooked in the arm holes of his fancy vest. He lay a steely look on Johnny Chance when Judd Stevens roared, "It's that road agent!"

The girl said, "I've hired Johnny Chance as your bodyguard, Father."

"Bodyguard! That *ladron*? Kurt, hand this kid over to the law!"

The dudish man's eyes glinted. He drew a derringer from inside his coat and leveled it at Johnny. But Louise said, "Kurt Bruckner, you harm this man and I'll never speak to you again. He isn't an outlaw. He was just in bad company. I want him to guard my father against that Pete Durango. Now put away that gun!"

The man obeyed, but he watched Johnny with surly eyes. Old Judd Stevens was glowering at his daughter. Johnny felt uncomfortable. He stood turning his sombrero over and over in his hands, trying to find something to say. Finally he blurted out, "I'm a good hand, sir."

"I don't need a bodyguard, kid. Durango won't bother me again."

"Maybe he won't, Mr. Stevens, but some other hombre maybe will." Johnny talked fast, wanting the job. "It wasn't only Durango's idea. We were hired by a masked man in Outpost that night. I don't know

who he was, but I figure he told Durango to gun you down."

Kurt Bruckner guffawed. "A likely story!"

Louise said, "I believe it." And Johnny could see a sudden worry in Judd Stevens' bushy-browed eyes. But before the mine owner could speak, a commotion sounded outside in the hall. Somebody pounded on the door and shouted, "Mr. Bruckner, I got to see you!"

Bruckner crossed and pulled open the door. A man wearing a miner's red shirt and lantern cap staggered in. He gasped for breath, then blurted, "The Rainbow's on fire! She's burnin' like a prairie fire!"

"It can't be!" Bruckner muttered. "You sure, Riley?"

"Sure I'm sure," the miner said. "I'm the night watchman, ain't I? I smelled smoke, so I went down on the hoist. The whole lower cut is blazin'. I'm tellin' you, mister, the Rainbow is a goner!"

Bruckner shoved him out, then grabbed up his hat from the horsehair sofa. He faced Judd Stevens and said, "I'll do what I can, sir."

Louise caught hold of his arm. "Kurt, be careful!"

He patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about me," he said, and hurried out.

Steve threw back the bed covers and got out in his night shirt. "Worry about him, hell!" he bellowed. "I'm worried about the Rainbow. If it ain't saved, I'll be ruined!" He motioned toward the door. "Clear out while I dress, you two!"

Johnny left with Louise. They kept on going, down the stairs and out of the hotel. The whole town knew of the fire, and everybody was moving excitedly along B Street in one direction. Johnny got his horse from the hitch rack and led it as he hurried along with Louise. There was a smell of fire in the night air, and once they were out of town Johnny saw clouds of black smoke billowing from the mountain slope.

He said, "What's Kurt Bruckner got to do with the Rainbow?"

"He operates it," the girl told him. "He's Dad's superintendent."

"You trust him?"

"Certainly!" She flashed him an angry look. "I trust him, even if my dad doesn't. Just because the Rainbow vein is petering out, he thinks Kurt is somehow cheating

him. We came all the way from New York so he could inspect the mine. He planned to make his inspection in the morning. Oh, I do hope the fire can be put out!"

JOHNNY hoped so, too. Louise's presence made his lonely heart pound crazily, and when he stole glances at her prettiness his mind built up high hopes. She had befriended him; he hoped she liked him. He would like to share those peaceful days he planned with Louise Stevens. But when they climbed the slope and pushed through the hundreds of excited people already gathered about the Rainbow's entrance, they learned there was scant hope of saving the mine.

The Rainbow was a big development. It was equipped with steam hoists and, it was claimed, a whole forest had gone into its supports, planking and chutes. It was this timber that was ablaze. If the fire was not controlled, it would take much time, work and money to reestablish production.

Red-shirted men were laboring at hand pumps, and hoses ran down into the shaft. Down in the earth, brave men were playing streams of water on the flames. Louise went and talked to the miner operating the hoist engine, and he told her that Kurt Bruckner had gone below with six men. White puffs of steam now emerged with the smoke. Heat puffed from the shaft as from a giant forge.

Judd Stevens came lumbering up, his heavy face strained with worry and his left arm, out of its sling now, dangling limply. He barked orders at the men at the pumps, shouted at the hoist operator, peered down into the shaft and came away choking on smoke. He came to his daughter and Johnny Chance, rage now mingling with his worry.

"That dude didn't want me to inspect the mine," he growled. "Now he's got his way. If I thought he set this fire—"

"Dad, Kurt is down there risking his life," Louise protested. "He was with us when it started. He was with us all day. He couldn't have started it! It's unkind of you to think such a thing!"

"All right," Stevens muttered. "He didn't set it. But somebody did, and maybe it was that *ladron* Pete Durango. If I get my hands—"

He broke off as a violent rumbling came from underground. It was an explosion, and a giant puff of smoke and steam came from the shaft. The crowd surged back, milled in panic, and veteran miners yelled, "Gas! She's blowin' up!"

There was another rumble, as the fumes generated by the fire compressed in the tunnels and then exploded, and the ground quaked underfoot. Johnny felt Louise's hand grip his arm. Her face was pale.

"Those men down there!" she cried. "Kurt—!"

DEATH WAITS IN OLD SANTA FE!

Only a suicidal fool, or a madly courageous buckskin man would risk not only his own life, but that of a reckless and lovely girl, to make that perilous trek to Santa Fe, on the forlorn chance of breaking her brother out of that thick-walled adobe prison!

You'll want to read Cliff Farrell's tensely dramatic novel—

"Beyond the Scalp Frontier"

—in the current *Dime Western*. Plus another novel of a wild boomtown that knew no law, by Tom Roan: "Gun-Angel of Showdown River," and gripping stories by Walt Coburn, William R. Cox, Bart Cassidy and other authors who knew and loved the Old West!



Buy your copy today
at your newsstand!

10¢ DIME ALL STORIES COMPLETE
WESTERN
MAGAZINE

The miner at the hoist had stayed by his post, and now, as the signal bell clanged, he pushed a lever to bring the cage up. It seemed a long time before the hoist appeared with its cargo of burned and injured men. Only two were standing. Four lay in crumpled heaps. All were smoke-be-grimed. Louise ran forward and stared at each man as he was moved away. Johnny too saw that one man was missing.

He stopped one of the miners who could walk. "Kurt Bruckner—where is he?"

"Below. The blast got him. He couldn't make it to the cage."

Louise's face was stricken. Judd Stevens faced the crowd and shouted, "A thousand dollars to the man who gets Bruckner out! Who'll volunteer?" When no man stepped forward, he cursed the crowd for cowards. "By damn!" he raged. "If I didn't have a hurt arm, I'd go down myself. Step up, somebody; I'll make it two thousand!"

The crowd remained silent. Men shook their heads, showing that they knew it would be suicide to venture below. Louise Stevens sobbed heartbrokenly, and said, "Kurt and I were to be married. And now—"

More than her despair twisted at Johnny Chance's heart. She had planned to marry Kurt Bruckner, and her friendliness to him meant nothing. The kid could see tears on her cheeks. He could not bear to see her cry. He did not want Louise Stevens to be unhappy.

He said, "I'll go down. Me, I ain't got nothin' to lose."

He saw the girl's eyes light up with hope. He heard the awed murmur of the crowd as he moved forward and entered the cage hoist.

"Keep the water comin'," he shouted to the pumps. "All right, let her go!"

Smoke enveloped the kid as the cage descended. The heat increased with each foot of the drop, and below was a wicked red glow that made Johnny remember a circuit rider he had once heard preaching about purgatory. The hoist carried him lower and lower, past several smoke-filled cuts, then suddenly it stopped and he saw the mass of flame in the lowest tunnel. He stumbled from the cage, choking on smoke. He could see nothing in that roiling smoke except the bright-red of the fire. The heat was a pressure forcing him back, but he

staggered on until he stumbled over the inert form of Kurt Bruckner.

Johnny grabbed the man under the armpits and dragged him backward, near collapse himself by the time he reached the cage. He struggled to get Bruckner inside, but by now the man had regained consciousness. They got aboard, but Johnny was reeling. He was too weak to tug the signal rope. Bruckner crawled across the platform, reaching. Johnny stared at the man's hand. On the third finger was a gold signet ring designed like a horse-shoe. Johnny stammered, "You—you're that masked man from Outpost!"

Bruckner's eyes were wild in his smoke-blackened face. He clung to the signal rope. The cage began to move slowly upward. Bruckner lifted his left leg, and his foot kicked the kid in the groin. Johnny fell backward out of the cage, landing on his back in the tunnel. The hoist carried Kurt Bruckner upward. The man hauled the signal rope up with him. He laughed mockingly.

JOHNNY got weakly to his feet, but the hoist was beyond his reach. It disappeared in the black smoke rolling up the shaft. The kid shouted hoarsely, but the roar of the flames at his back drowned out his voice. Bitterness welled up in him. It wasn't fair. Kurt Bruckner was saved, and Kurt Bruckner was a bad one.

It had been Bruckner who put Pete Durango up to that attempt on Judd Stevens' life. It must have been Bruckner who had the Rainbow fired, so Judd Stevens, having lived to reach Virginia City, could not see that the mine was being systematically robbed.

Minutes passed, each an eternity. The fire roared nearer. Water had been pouring through the two hoses which ran down into the tunnel, but now the water stopped and one of the hoses was being pulled up. The second began to move.

Johnny stared at it. He staggered to the hose, fell upon it. He unbuckled his gun-belt and the belt to his jeans. He buckled them again, around both his body and the hose. He was dragged across the plank-ing. He was lifted up the shaft a few feet. Johnny Chance, the wild kid, breathed a prayer.

Rough miners with suddenly tender

hands lifted the half unconscious Johnny from the hose after its long slow journey to the surface. He was laid on a blanket on the ground, and a medico from town bent over him. A whiskey bottle was tilted to his lips, and he drank. He gasped, then choked, "Where's Kurt Bruckner?"

"Judd Stevens and his daughter took him to town," somebody said.

Johnny lifted himself to his feet. He staggered to his horse and pulled himself into the saddle. He made sure of his gun as he rode down into town. Smoke-blackened and ugly eyed, he looked like a man come back from purgatory. He put the roan into a lope. He wanted to overtake Kurt Bruckner before the man learned of his escape.

A crowd had followed Bruckner and the Stevenses into town, and Johnny overtook them on B Street near the International Hotel. He shouted, "Bruckner, hold up!" And the whole crowd turned.

Bruckner uttered a frightened yell and drew his derringer. He fired wildly. Johnny, untouched, drew and fired and hit the man in the right arm. Bruckner screamed and reeled back against Judd Stevens.

Johnny dismounted. He saw Louise's startled face. He did not want to make her unhappy, but he knew he had to save her from Kurt Bruckner. He said, "Folks, this man is the masked hombre who hired me, Pete Durango and Boot Lynch in Outpost.

I figure he's been robbin' the Rainbow—"

Bruckner shouted, "Durango, get him!"

Johnny whirled. He saw Pete Durango, disguised by a miner's red shirt and lantern cap and a week's growth of whiskers. Durango, stepping out from the gaping crowd, leveled a sixgun and fired. Johnny had jumped sideways, and his own gun exploded. Durango collapsed, cursing.

The kid heard Louise cry out, "Johnny—behind you!"

He turned and saw that Bruckner was lunging at him. The man had grabbed Judd Stevens' walking-stick, and the naked blade was in his hand. The cold steel stabbed into the kid's shoulder, and he fell over backwards. Bruckner made another thrust, this time for the heart, but Johnny's gun roared again. The blade fell from Bruckner's hand, and he crumpled to the street and did not move.

The crowd milled around the fallen kid. Somebody shouted, "Fetch the medico! The kid is bleedin' like a stuck pig!"

But Johnny was not worried. Judd Stevens came and gripped his hand. And Louise, the prettiest sight he had ever seen, was kneeling beside him. There was a world of grief in her eyes, but Johnny knew she would forget this night in time.

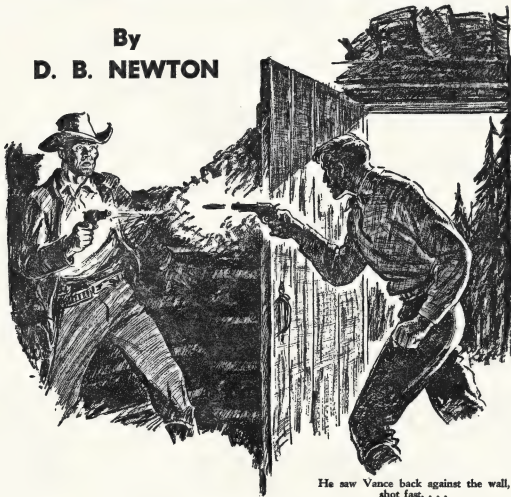
He felt good inside. It looked as though Johnny Chance would spend his few remaining days in peace, in very good company.

Curse of the River

There's an old tradition about the Hassayampa River, in Arizona. Whoever drank of its water would thereafter be unable to speak the truth. Henry Wickenburg, a prospector, rested with some others on the bank of the Hassayampa, but for some reason drifted off by himself. When he returned to the others he announced that he'd discovered gold nearby. He had. But they refused to believe him, thought he was lying. Later they sued for interests in the rich Vulture mine. For several years there was an abundance of crime in and around the town of Wickenburg, until the Hassayampa's flood waters got through the dam to the north and wrought great havoc and destruction. About the same time the rich vein of the Vulture vanished, although many believe it is still there, waiting to be found again. It was on his 88th birthday that Henry Wickenburg put a bullet in his brain, for he was found dead with a pistol in his hand on the spot on the bank of the Hassayampa where he'd announced his discovery of gold, only to be told he lied.

Powdersmoke Wisdom

By
D. B. NEWTON



He saw Vance back against the wall,
shot fast. . . .

*Fugitive Sam Boland wanted to go straight, forget his too-quick triggers
—but his only path crossed the trail of three notch-hungry killers!*

SAM BOLAND had been hunting, and he rode homeward now with his rifle thrust in the boot and a fine buck deer slung in back of the saddle. A certain quiet satisfaction was in him, contentment softening the lines of a face that looked older than his years demanded. This new life, at least, was peaceful, and it was cheap. It cost less in money and effort than he would ever have thought possible. But it was lonely.

He wanted it that way. He didn't need

company, here in the high foothills. Sometimes he would go alone to a point of rock that gave him a far view of the valley below, with its peppering of sage, its irrigated green stretches, and far away a scattered town. But that was as near to civilization as he wanted to get.

That was why, topping a ridge and slanting down through a stand of jackpine and juniper toward his cabin, Sam jerked reins suddenly and stared in sharp suspicion at the clearing, and the crude log structure.

The door stood open, and he knew he had left it closed. It was a small thing, but it rang an alarm bell in his ear. For a moment he waited there, motionless in the dark shadow of the pines, studying the layout.

His thoughts flashed back to the day a month ago when he had run across another rider in these lonely hills. Sam didn't even know for sure whether the other man had seen him, but he had lived in watchful dread after that time, waiting—wondering if his haven had been discovered and he would have to take to the hunted trails of the owl-hoot again.

The law said Boland had six more years to serve, for a boneheaded youthful error. Sam knew he would never live out that time, in the cold damp hell of prison. Not after this taste of freedom. And he was harming no one now. If they would only let him alone. . . .

But he knew by reputation that the sheriff of that smiling range below, Lew White by name, was considered a bulldog on any outlaw trail; a cold, efficient man-hunter—

Sam had waited through many tense days after his encounter with the stranger in the hills, waited for a sign that the alarm had been given. Had lurked in the shadows, watching from the thicket for the flash of sunlight on a metal badge.

Until, as the weeks passed, he had come to feel that, after all, he was still safe. Had breathed easier again, judging that the other hadn't seen him after all—or at least wondered too hard about his presence in these lost hills. Had not been bothered enough to tell the law.

And now a cabin door stood open, that he distinctly remembered leaving shut.

He slipped from the saddle, lifting the rifle out of its boot as he did so. Cautiously, he went on foot down through the trees, toward that silent clearing, the weapon ready to snap to his shoulder. Narrowed gray eyes searched constantly for some evidence of life, saw none.

Then a man came to the door and looked out.

He saw Sam Boland, and at once a revolver was in his fingers and leveled, before Sam had a chance to bring up the rifle. But then the man recognized who it was and a look of surprise washed over his face.

He began to grin, crookedly. The six-shooter plopped back into the holster that was thonged against his leg.

He said: "Well, look who's here!" Over his shoulder he called, "Doc. . . . Trigger. . . . Just take a gander at this!"

Sam Boland's face hadn't lost its tight, wary look; he still stood there, body tense, the rifle half raised. There was no pleasure in his eyes as two other men came lounging out through the door of his cabin and stood in the open.

Doc, waxen faced, somnolent, somehow unclean; Trigger, a thin slab of a man with a stupid eagerness in his face and in the gaunt hooks that were his hands. They greeted him each in his own manner, Sam returning their nods shortly.

He looked back at their leader. "What's the deal, Spade?" he demanded. "What are you three skunks doin' here?"

A look of reproach swept over the man's dark features. "Now, Sam!" Spade Vance chided. "That ain't any way to greet friendly visitors. We didn't mean you no harm; we didn't even know this was your layout. But now that we're here, you might at least set that rifle down and make us welcome."

Sam shrugged, and reluctantly let the butt of the weapon slide down by his heel. Spade's glance ran over his lean frame, the tanned face and gray eyes of him. "You're lookin' well, Sam. I'm mighty sorry you don't seem any more pleased than this to see us. It's been a long time.

"Likely you're still a little sore at us for what happened that night over at Powder Creek. It was a rotten break, all right; but surely you can see there was nothin' we could have done to prevent it. And afterwards it was too late and too damn risky for us to help. We was mighty glad a few months ago, though, when we heard you was on the loose again."

Sam Boland shook his head, firmly. "I carry no grudge. I've had four years to burn that kind of thing out of me. No, it's just that you and Trigger and the Doc here are three characters I never expected to lay eyes on again, and never wanted to. You're part of something I hoped to forget."

"Too bad," the outlaw clucked, solemnly. "Too bad. We don't like you feelin' that way about us."

FOR the first time, Doc spoke in his clipped, polished tone. "Sam's a reasonable chap," he said, rasping paper-dry hands together. "We shouldn't have any trouble. I'd suggest we go inside and talk this thing over in comfort. Perhaps over a bottle."

"A good idea," Spade Vance agreed. "Better than standin' around here in the hot sun like a bunch of tom cats talkin' up a fight."

Sam followed them into the cabin, misgivings riding him and making him sullen. Trigger, who never spoke much, went over and sprawled on the bunk; the rest took chairs around the pine table that Sam had built, and Doc produced a bottle from somewhere. He poured the liquor into tin cups, but Sam set his on the table in front of him and left it untasted.

"What's the idea?" he demanded, again. "How long do you figure on stayin' in here?"

"Let me check that one back to you," Vance said. "How long *you* been here?"

"Three months."

"Ever have any trouble?"

"You're the first."

"Law hasn't bothered you?"

At Sam's negative, Spade and the Doc exchanged glances. The Doc raised one eyebrow, said, "You would appear to be right, Spade."

"About what?" Sam cut in, sharply. "I want to know what you three vultures are up to."

"All right, Sam. It's this." And both Spade and the Doc watched him carefully as the former explained. "We're hot. We pulled a job—a bank down in Corvo. And we saw this place and it looked like a good spot to hole up until it blows over."

Corvo! That was Sheriff Lew White's stamping ground—the town Boland could see in the distance, when he sat and looked far out over the range. He said: "You robbed a bank in Corvo?"

Spade nodded, jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The loot's in my saddle bags, out there with our horses in the trees. A mighty good haul, too—seems to be pretty fair country down in the valley. In fact, we thought we might stick around the hills awhile; work out of this place as our headquarters, and be ready to head out through the gap if things got too hot—"

"No!" Sam's voice was hard, vibrant with anger. It made even Trigger sit up on the bunk, swinging his feet down. "Do you hear me, Spade? There'll be nothing like that here!"

"Why not?" Spade demanded. "You'll get your cut, Boland. And you don't even have to ride with us if you'd rather not. It's a perfect setup."

"No! You'll bring the law right in on us. Besides—"

Sam hesitated. He couldn't tell them the rest, somehow, because he didn't think they'd understand. He didn't understand it so very well himself—why it was he couldn't bear to see that smiling land below ravaged by this outlaw crew. Surely, Corvo valley with its ranches and farms shouldn't mean anything to him; and yet it did although he was not a part of it. He suddenly realized how much it had meant to him to sit and look for long hours down on that peaceful, quiet world, and draw some of its peace into his own troubled heart.

But that wouldn't make any sense to Spade and the rest of them, so he didn't say it. But his gray eyes as they met Spade's furious look were level and unyielding. Tension all but crackled around them, for a moment. Then the Doc broke it by giving out a rather uneasy laugh.

"Why work ourselves up?" he demanded, pouring himself another drink with his yellow, waxen hands. "Sam knows what he wants, and he's right of course. This is his place. He should say what's to be done and what isn't." He drained the cup, sat it down and smacked colorless lips. His pale eyes were on Spade's. "Let it drop," he finished. "Perhaps Sam would fix his old friends up with a bait of supper, and we can be on our way. Why not? There's plenty of greener fields."

Spade Vance scowled, hating to give in. But finally he did, with a shrug that took the tenseness out of his shoulders. "All right," he grumbled. "If you think that'd be better, Doc."

Trigger didn't say anything. Sam stood up. "I've got fresh meat outside. I'll be glad to fry you up a chunk of it. I hope you really do see how I feel about this," he went on, slowly. "I've had all the trouble I want with the law. Now, I—just want to have things quiet."

Vance nodded, briefly. "Yeah. Sure. I

reckon I know, Sam. I think you're makin' a mistake, but— Well, that's your business."

Sam Boland left the cabin, walked through the still afternoon up to the place where he'd left his bronc. He brought it down to the clearing, and dragged the heavy carcass of the deer from its back. He had taken two steps when a gun spoke inside the cabin doorway.

Sam fell forward across the carcass. The bullet, meant for him, had thudded into the meat instead.

STILLNESS had settled again over the clearing, after that one shot. Sam's back tingled expectantly, almost waiting for another bullet to come.

He didn't have a gun on him.

And now they were coming out of the building, six-guns in their hands. Through halfclosed eyes, Sam watched them. Spade and the Doc stopped by the door, and Spade said: "Go take a look, Trigger."

The tall gunman nodded, came toward Sam until he stood over him, and all Sam could see of him was his scuffed boots.

Trigger nudged him with a toe, and he gave to it limply. After a long moment the gunman said, "Okay, Spade."

Spade and the Doc dropped their weapons into holsters, Vance saying, "Take care of him, Trigger," as they turned to go into the cabin. And at that instant, Sam moved.

He heaved upward, threw himself at Trigger's legs; and the gaunt man, leaning over him, went off balance and toppled across his back with a yell. Sam twisted, got a hand on the man's gun and jerked it from his fingers.

Then the gunman's body jerked as lead drilled into it.

He had taken a bullet meant for Boland. Sam, rolling under the dead man's weight, got back to where he could see the door. Both Spade and the Doc, warned by Trigger's yell, had their weapons out again and Spade was firing for the second time. Sam fired back, missed. Pulled trigger again just as the Doc's gun flamed, and saw the latter stumble, pain making a horrible mask of his waxen features. The man crumpled back against the wall of the cabin.

And Sam came up to his feet, stepped over the carcass of the deer and started

toward Spade Vance, gun blazing. Spade, a look of hate twisting his dark face, took a step back into the doorway and around the edge of it. Boland charged ahead. The barrel of Spade's gun, thrust past the door, flamed and lead struck Sam a hot blow that didn't stop him. He went straight in through the door. Saw Spade Vance, back in the shadows against the wall. Triggered two quick shots squarely at him.

He thought they were good ones, but he couldn't tell. Because everything blacked out for a moment and then he was lying sprawled across the doorstep, and there was blood in his mouth where he had cut himself on falling.

A great stillness was over everything. Sam clutched the sill of the door, pushed himself up enough to look across it and see Spade Vance huddled on the floor inside.

He let himself down again, then, lay half inside the doorway with part of him in shadow and part with the hot sun beating down. He seemed to hear hoofbeats coming nearer, but his brain wouldn't function properly with the sound. They stopped again. And then someone had come and was leaning over him, turning him over.

Sam knew the face. It was the stranger he had seen in the hills a month before. It put an alarm inside him and gave Sam the strength to pull himself to a sitting position. And then he saw the star on the stranger's vest.

"Take it easy," the man said, his voice kind. "I ain't gonna eat you."

"You're—Lew White!"

The sheriff nodded. "I've had my eye on you for some time, Boland—ever since I ran across you here in the hills a month ago. I knew something about your case. I decided you were trying to go straight, and I figured I'd let you.

"I came in today on the trail of these three bank robbers, but I lost it; then the sound of gunfire set me right. You've cleaned them all out, Boland, single-handed—a damn fine job. I'll see that the governor hears about this. It ought to get the rest of your sentence suspended!"

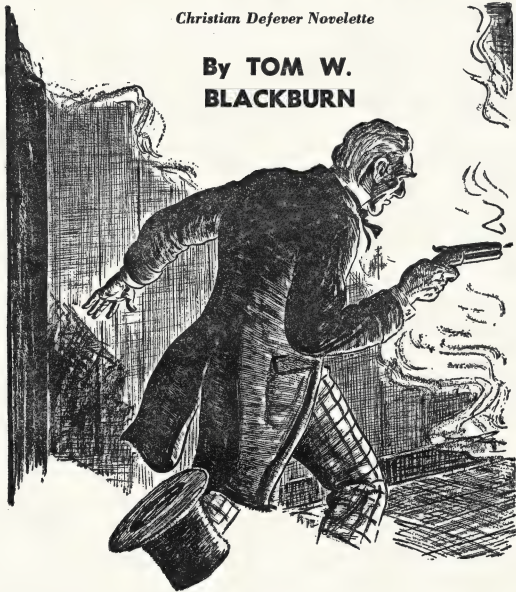
Sam stared at him, dazed. A suspension! He could hardly believe it—but he'd heard enough about Lew White to figure this sheriff should know what he was talking about!



BOOTHILL'S

Christian Defever Novelette

**By TOM W.
BLACKBURN**



*"Christian Defever for Mayor!" That election cry warmed Chris' heart.
But when he started his campaign, his thundering, captivating voice—
turned to a wheezing croak!*

ELECTION DAY



Defever's big derringer sang a lethal song. . .

CHAPTER ONE

Boomer's Luck

DUST and a dying sun dropped a kindly blanket over the stark and stubborn buildings lining the main street of Grass City. Raising a deliberate and unhurried trail of dust, a butcher's wagon, covered with a richly stained tar-

paulin, rolled down the center of the track. Its driver drooped on the seat, weary after the drive in from out of the neighboring ranches with his load of freshly slaughtered beef.

As the slowly moving wagon approached the main intersection of the town, a flashy single-rig buggy sailed arrogantly out of the side street and started to turn onto the

main drag. The driver of the butcher's wagon did not see the buggy. And the wagon held on. A large, beefy man, turned out in flashy gear, was driving the buggy.

He bellowed. An instant later the two vehicles collided with a splintering crash. The buggy lost a wheel against the stout hub of the wagon. The dressy man was pitched from his seat into the dust of the roadway. A crowd started forming on the run.

The man in the buggy was Gus Thibault—gambler, opportunist, owner of the Old Home Saloon, and candidate for mayor in an impending city election. It was an obviously rich treat for his fellow citizens to see Thibault in the dust. It was a place into which he had kicked many men but seldom reached himself.

Raging with anger, Thibault started to his feet, clutching at the side of the butcher's wagon for support. But as his hand gripped the planking, the tarpaulin over the wagon's load raised. A man's head appeared—a head thatched with an imposing shock of gray hair and to which was attached a long and horsey face. After the head, with an habitual smoothness of motion which belied the man's age, came a long, gaunt figure. It was shabbily clad in a frocked coat and gaitered trousers which might have long ago come from the shop of a good tailor.

This strange figure reached a battered beaver hat from under the tarpaulin and viewed Grass City with the astonishment of one who has been sleeping and suddenly awakes to be confronted with something he does not wish to see. The old gent stared for a moment, clapped his hat onto his head with a certain elegance, and stepped onto the sideboard of the wagon with the measured grace of a dignitary descending the steps of a coach on the Kansas City Limited.

There was, however, a flaw in his grace. His foot came down solidly on Gus Thibault's clutching hand. Thibault squatted and jerked his hand free. Startled, the old scarecrow on the wagon lost his balance and fell outward, crashing against Thibault and carrying him again into the dust.

The citizenry of Grass City stood rooted, as though they were watching a close-cut fuse burn into a large and violent charge of powder. The charge exploded. Thibault

rolled cursing out of the tangle, bounded to his feet, and lashed a savage kick at the gaunt old man's face while the stranger was still on his knees.

What happened was not in the book. The horsey face changed location agilely. A huge, long fingered hand seized the curly wolf of Grass City by the ankle, and Gus Thibault made a complete revolution in the air before he landed again in the ruts with punishing solidness. A few timid citizens, lacking sand to witness further violence of the kind to which Thibault had accustomed them, began to slink away at this.

But there was no further violence. Thibault came to his feet, livid with anger and clawing at his belt. But the clawing stopped. The old party stood facing Thibault easily. One hand held an unusually competent looking derringer of enormous size. The other was thrust carelessly deep in a side pocket of the shabby coat. And from that pocket came a musical clinking, as though idle fingers there were rattling together a handful of loose shells for the big gun.

The old party did not look truculent. But an aura of lethal skill clung to him. It dampened Thibault's anger and held the crowd in wooden astonishment.

"Courtesy," the old party observed as a pleasant generality, "is the mark of a gentleman. I do not wish to appear wanting. As the Great Bard saith: *A knave may forgive even a bad king for a wrong repented.* And truly I regret the unhappy turmoil!"

Thibault snorted savagely.

"You'll a damn sight more than regret it!" he promised. "You wall eyed old hyena!"

The old party was untouched by the venom. He rocked the derringer suggestively, as though the conversation had reached a suitable stopping place. Thibault colored a deeper red and his eyes fined down to hard points. But he was helpless under the muzzle of the big gun. He wheeled, shouldered roughly through the crowd, and plunged on toward the Old Home Saloon.

The old party watched him go with a mild grin on his mobile lips. When Thibault had passed through the slatted doors of the Old Home, the old gent pocketed his gun with automatic ease and turned to those nearest him with a little bow.

"Permit me, Gentlemen—" he said—"Christian Defever, a professional man temporarily at liberty from the world of footlights and the demands of an exacting art. I have suffered hardships along the highroad to your hamlet and my arrival has left me distraught. Kindly direct me to your best hostelry. I have need of a footbath and a dish of tea—"

Somebody pointed wordlessly toward the Valley Inn. As the old party moved off—limping like a man winding up a long foot-tour—Higby of the *Grass City News* whistled between his teeth.

"Tea!" Higby snorted. "If that old goat ever drank a cup of anything weaker than raw white mule, I'm a baboon! I wonder—by hell, he might do!"

Higby choked himself off and vanished in the still stunned and delighted crowd.

HAVING secured a room and the services of the Valley Inn by holding his thumb over the ten-year-old date on a Wells-Fargo letter of credit he carried in his wallet, Chris Defever soaked his blistered feet in a pail of hot water and considered his fortune.

He had, he wryly feared, arrived in this town at the very nadir of his luck. Luck was—and he knew from experience that the old saying was sadly too true—a fickle woman. It appeared that his suit with this lady, like those with women of flesh and blood, fared more poorly as he grew older. He was no longer a gay blade and his fortunes suffered accordingly.

It was bad enough to arrive in a new town footsore and without funds. But to arrive as he had here—asleep in a butcher's wagon amid shanks of dead beef! And to make an enemy of an apparently well-to-do and important citizen at the same time—a master stroke of misfortune and humiliation! He had meant to climb down from that butcher's wagon in which he had taken sanctuary along the road when his feet gave out.

He had meant to walk the last half mile into this town like a peer on a walking-tour. There was a certain dignity to such an arrival of which his nap in the butcher's wagon had robbed him. And dignity was about all the working capital he had for use in this town.

Chris shrugged with noble philosophy

and bit into one of the thick sandwiches on a plate at his elbow. He had at least achieved relief for his feet. He had food for his belly, a bed in which to rest his carcass. Why rail at luck?

He would rise early, quit this inn by the back door before the host was up, and be on his way. There were other towns along this benighted frontier, the next perhaps not too far distant. His pockets would not always be empty. There was a law of averages. And like a gambler, not even Fate could always successfully tamper with it.

He had just arrived at these conclusions, taking what thin solace he could from them, when his door opened swiftly and silently. Three men slid through it and it closed again. Two of them were stone faced gambling men, equally at ease with decked cards in their hands or the guns which they now held levelled at Defever's midsection. The third was the man whose buggy had been wrecked on the street below.

"Bleat and you'll only bleat once!" this man rapped. "I want to talk to you!"

Chris eyed the guns and raised his brows. He lacked no confidence in himself. But with his feet in a bucket of hot water and his own weapons in his coat on the bed across the room, he had no desire to test out odds of three to one. Besides, the man said he wanted to talk. And it was Defever's experience that talk could lead to many things—occasionally even profit.

"It appears you have me at your service, Sir," he said wryly.

"You're an actor?"

"I was once not unknown in that profession," Chris admitted modestly. "A slight mischance had kept me from the boards of late—"

"Mischance!" the man growled drily. "Powdersmoke, more likely! You're a handy man with iron."

Chris flinched uneasily. This man was shrewd—plenty shrewd. The black cloak of the lamented past covered many things. Among them was that combination of overhasty temper and back-stage derringer magic which had these many moons ago sent Chris high-tailing across the Missouri to lose himself in raw hospitality of the western plains. It was enough to know that he was forever vanished from his beloved footlights, but to have the reason for his

banishment so shrewdly guessed displeased him. He frowned.

"Let it go—let it go!" the beefy man said. "I can use you. I'm Gus Thibault. There's an election coming up in this town and I've got to win it. Here's the game—"

CHAPTER TWO

Orator Wanted

"THIS blasted, stiff-necked town is astraddle the best trail-herd route from Texas to the railroad," Thibault complained. "If the drovers got to stopping off here, I'd make a fat rake-off from my tables and bar. But they won't. Not while Tim Higby and Ben Anderson and young Hale and some others are crusadin' for law and order in the place. Texans like hell runnin' wild when they're playin' and I've got to give it to 'em or go broke. This election's come along just right. And you're going to help me win it, Defever!"

Chris wrinkled his nose wryly.

"I admit this reluctantly, Sir," he said. "I have an artist's pride in his own ability. But I doubt that even my considerable skill with words would win you a single vote!"

"I'll worry about that!" Thibault snapped. "You just talk. Talk a hell of a lot. Make the town think Gus Thibault is campaigning like any other fool who depends on other men's votes to get what they want. I'll be busy while you're fronting for me. When poll-time comes, there'll be few voters get to the boxes with any name but mine on their slips. I just don't want the town to suspect what's coming. And you can do that."

Chris felt the surge of the gambler's confidence. Florid and flamboyant the man might be, but he was also coolly dangerous. And his plans appeared to be well made. Grass City was headed for a nasty piece of trouble. Chris could feel it in his bones. And his bones were sensitive to trouble. But this was not his town. And he was without funds. A man lived by thinking of himself.

"I am accustomed to substantial fees—" he suggested.

Thibault stood up and tossed a bill down on the table.

"A hundred for a starter," he said short-

ly. "Stay inside the traces till the votes are counted and there'll be two more. Enough?"

Three hundred silver ducats—a princely sum! A man could sell the Devil to St. Peter for less! Chris clutched the bill. With this and a little luck at a gaming table when opportunity provided and a man might wind up with thousands—

"Just one other thing, Defever—" Thibault said from the doorway. "I'm not going to muff this play. I want this town—lock, stock and barrel. I'm going to have it—and I'm going to watch every corner. A couple of the boys will be keeping their eyes on you—"

Chris nodded. Thibault grinned flatly.

"There's apt to be some accidents in this town before election. Don't get curious about 'em or one might happen to you!"

Chris nodded again.

Thibault signalled his men and went out into the hall. The door closed behind the three of them. There was a moment of muttered council there. After this only the footsteps of one man moved down the hall. Chris heard this evidence of the posting of a guard outside his door with raised brows. Thibault had not been joking when he hinted at thoroughness. The man was, Chris realized, dead in his earnestness.

He thought about it for a little, permitting himself even a brief snatch of sympathy for the men who had founded this town and would fight for it. Finally he shrugged and lifting his feet from the tub of now cooled water, he began towelling them.

"*We must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures,*" he quoted softly to himself. And he took heart from this scrap of wisdom from the Great Bard.

Defever had been deep in the dreamless sleep of the innocent for some time when he was roused by some sound. He thought at first it was the echoing snoring one of Thibault's guards, outside the door. But the sound came again—from the window. A light tapping on the pane. Chris rose, crossed to the opening, and raised the sash. A man crouched on a landing on the rickety stairs, which slanted up the back wall of the hotel.

"Sssh!" the man demanded sharply. He turned and made a signal toward the ground. Others moved there, starting up the steps. Chris stood in the window, somewhat puzzled and shivering in his long

woolens until he realized one of the ascending figures was a woman. He bleated in panicky alarm and had barely time to clutch a blanket from the bed about him before his callers squeezed in the window.

There were four of them—three men and the woman who kept to shadows with one of the men close beside her. The first man into the room crossed swiftly to the door and listened carefully to the deep breathing of the guards bedded down in the hall. Apparently satisfied, he touched the wick of Defever's lamp alight.

CHRIS scowled at all of this. He did not relish this cool intrusion. When he was dressed for sleeping he liked to sleep and he did not care for being routed out to play host to three strangers and a woman in a shabby blanket and bare feet.

"You are looking for me?" he growled.

"You're Christian Defever, ain't you?" the leader of the quartet snapped.

"I am!" Chris agreed frostily. "And if you have business with me, it can wait until morning. I receive no calls in my room after eight!"

"The hell!" the man said sarcastically. "Till morning, eh? This can't wait at all! Gus Thibault was up to see you. What did he want?"

"The devil!" Chris exploded angrily. Then he checked himself to bent his blanket-wrapped figure stiffly toward the woman in apology. "Why this? My business with Mr. Thibault was private. So is this room. Get out—all of you!"

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" the man protested. "We're somewhere near our rights. I'm Tim Higby. I publish a paper here and I set a store by this town. This is Ben Seymour from the hardware across the street. That's Bud Hale, back in the corner with my niece. We aim to see a fair election day after tomorrow and we want to know what Thibault wanted."

"Then ask Thibault!" Chris snapped.

"All right, boys!" he said.

Chris was not looking for it. Maybe he was a little too concerned about his appearance in the blanket. Maybe he was yet a little sleepy. Maybe he was wondering what these pillars of the toppling peace of Grass City thought they could do against Thibault, even if they knew every detail of his plan. Christian Defever was, at any rate, caught flat.

Higby launched himself like a squat bulldog. His fist landed a little low, paralyzing Defever's bulbous Adam's-apple. Ben Seymour, a thin and bearded man, flung himself on Defever's back, staggering him off balance. Bud Hale, the youngest of them all and the most powerful, lunged out of the corner where he had been standing with the girl whose face Chris had not yet seen. But before Hale could join the tangle, the girl called out sharply.

"Stop it—Bud—all of you! Uncle Tim, stop it!"

The men freed Chris and he fought out of the encumbering blanket. The girl had moved closer to the lamp. Chris saw that she was young—which meant much in his measuring eyes. But she was also beautiful. The kind of beauty which changed with the moods of its owner. Her eyes were flashing and the color of her cheeks was high, now. Chris marvelled that a bull-dog of a man could claim blood ties with so long lined and gracefully built a girl.

If a town, Chris thought—even this town—were as beautiful as such a girl, even he would fight for its peace. And without recompense. As it was—His throat hurt like the devil where Higby's wildly thrown fist had landed. He massaged it gently and hauled the blanket back up around him.

"I'm beholden to you, Miss," he said. "These wild men—"

His intonations were those which had thrilled a thousand audiences in the first blooming of an Act Two romance. He had

DON'T WASTE WASTE PAPER!

Fold your newspapers flat and tie in bundles about 12 inches high. . . . Any junk dealer or charitable organization will collect them!

calculated them to establish a bond with this girl. But something had gone wrong with his voice. He sounded like a cross between a witch and a wagon on cobblestones. Because of this, the speech failed in its purpose. The girl was untouched. Her lips curled lightly in scorn.

"These wild men," she said, "are risking their necks for something in which they believe. We came up here tonight to pay you a compliment, to make you an offer. On the way we heard Gus Thibault had been here ahead of us. We felt we had to know what you had agreed with him before we made our proposition. Uncle Tim saw you handle Thibault on the street this evening. Uncle Tim would be a bad gambler if he wasn't a newspaperman. He was willing to risk everything on you. He—"

The girl stopped, bit her lip, then suddenly laughed. It was not a nice sound. There was no humor in it. Only a self scorn which stung bitterly.

"There's our candidate for mayor, Uncle Tim! There's our chance for keeping some kind of law in our town, Bud—schools and kids and Sunday-night socials! A prominent actor, an orator and a man of judgement and a desirable citizen! You've got that set up in tomorrow's editorial, Uncle Tim. And look at him—Christian Defever—accepting the Committee's nomination!"

The girl choked off, buried her face in her hands, and her shoulders shook. Chris could not tell whether she laughed or cried. A little of both, he thought. He stared helplessly, cut to the shallow quick of his pride by her mockery. Tim Higby grunted.

"It ain't too bad, Ruthie—" he protested. "This was just a flash idea that came to me when I saw the tangle at the wreck on the street tonight. We'll run Bud, like we figgered in the first place. And we'll hope to hell the town will believe he's got enough behind him to whip Thibault if we win the election! Bud—get her out of here afore she wakes up them gunhands snoring in the hall!"

Young Hale helped the girl out the window. Higby punched a broad finger at the place where Defever's vest should have been.

"You forget this and keep your elbows out of this election, friend! Thibault isn't the only tough gent in this town. Remember that!"

Higby crossed to the window and followed Ben Seymour's thin body through the opening. As they straightened on the landing outside, Higby spoke again. Chris heard him clearly.

"Maybe we didn't handle that right, Ben. We should have left Ruthie home like I wanted. Confound a stubborn woman! The old boy didn't look his best in his drawers. I'd still feel a sight better if we had the guns I seen him palm tonight on our side when the voting starts! They'd beat countin' on friends and the rest of the town fightin' its own fight. They'd beat it a long ways. This is going to be nasty—I hate to think how nasty. And Bud bound to drag Ruthie with him right into the middle of it!"

Chris massaged his throat thoughtfully. So, in spite of the humiliation and the clumsily attempted strong-arming with which it had been marked, this weird visitation had started out in the beginning as a call from a nominating committee! *The Honorable Christian Defever—Mayor!* It had a sonorous ring and a spacious sound. There was doubtless an attractive stipend which went with the office, too. But gone beyond reach, now. Withered by the scorn of a woman. Such was fate!

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Handicap

DEFEVER awoke refreshed and with nothing to mark the events of the night before but a rather garbled memory and a slight soreness where Tim Higby's wild haymaker had caught him off guard. He had breakfast alone at a table in the dining room of the Valley Inn and sauntered out onto the street in mid-morning.

During the meal two men had loitered in the lobby of the hotel, viewing a moth-eaten potted palm and two limp geraniums with unseasonable interest. He was mildly amused to note that that they followed him into the sun and drifted along behind him in a fair imitation of his own haphazard progress up the street.

Abreast of the Old Home saloon he paused for a moment, letting his better self wrestle the thirsty inner man into submission. When the brief if bitter struggle was done, he set his hat against the angle

CASSIE'S KISS STRIKE

Thrilling Novel
of Frontier Love

By
MARIAN O'HEARN



Lovely Cassie tried to call a kiss strike against Sheriff Jock Lannon—while she collected evidence to free her imprisoned sweetheart.

—Also—

Heiress To Heartbreak

The frigid Sierras couldn't freeze Sally's tempestuous love for the buckskin mountain man, even though she was promised to another.

Stirring Romance Novelette by Art Lawson

**RANGELAND
ROMANCES**
15c

And other selected novelettes, short stories
and illustrated features in the big May
issue. . . .

You Can Buy It TODAY!

of the sun and moved on. Grass City was, he saw, a pleasant place.

It had been built in a stand of old cottonwoods which cast a pleasant shade and strangely attractive litter of cotton balls and dead leaves on vacant ground. Streets and lots had been honestly surveyed. A clear creek looped through the trees so that it surrounded the town on three sides.

Midway up the street he passed under the weathered sign over the building housing the Grass City News. He saw Higby's broad back bent over a composing table—doubtless at work re-setting an editorial originally composed to welcome a theatrical man into the ranks of local politics. Higby started to look up and Chris lengthened his stride to get past the windows of the News. And he chafed at his still throbbing throat.

A little farther on he crossed the street, attracted by a crowd of half a dozen or so gathered in front of a blacksmith shop. It appeared that the smith, a square-faced man with a wide, good-humored mouth, was shoeing a fractious and vicious horse.

The owner of the animal was holding the free end of a rope which dropped from a ceiling beam. The smith raised the animal's foot. The owner snubbed a pair of dallies around the hock, and held onto the free end. The animal tried a pair of kicks, but was brought up short by the rope. The smith grinned.

"That'll hold him! A horse as cussed as that shouldn't need no iron on his hoof."

The owner grinned likewise and the smith started to work. The animal struggled to free its pinioned leg occasionally and turned its head to roll wild eyes at the man pruning the uplifted hoof. But with the owner keeping a tension on the free end of the rope, the dallies held snugly and the smith worked untroubled. The pruning was nearly finished when the owner of the horse asked an apparently idle question.

"How you voting tomorrow, Ed?"

The smith straightened. He glanced at the owner of the horse with a vague uneasiness. But he answered levelly.

"In this country we have a secret ballot. I don't tell secrets, Benton!"

"For Gus—maybe?" the owner of the horse prodded.

Defever's interest picked up. He realized this was no accidental thing. Benton had

veiled a nasty look. The smith spat.

"When there's two honest men on a ballot a voter has a choice to make. When there's only one, he don't. No—I don't vote for Thibault!"

"Think that's smart, Ed?" Benton asked softly.

"I don't vote for smartness!" the smith snapped. "I vote for law and right. I vote for the things I want and my neighbor wants. And we don't want Thibault to make a renegade's roost out of our—"

The smith choked off. The big horse thrashed violently. Without seeing it, Chris knew Benton had prodded the touchy animal. At the same time the free end of the check rope slipped out of Benton's hand. The dallies slackened and the powerful leg unleashed in a murderous kick. Caught awkwardly still astraddle of the up-bent hoof, the smith was flung across his shop. He plowed head first into his anvil-block.

A pair of inches higher and the man's head would have struck the tapered bending-point of the anvil. As it was he jolted solidly into the cottonwood log of the stand, rolled over, and climbed with dazed slowness to his feet. He put his hand carefully to his head and felt of the blood welling from a huge gash there. Somebody took his arm and started him across the street.

"We've got to see Doc about that cut. Ed. You were lucky! That could have been a bad one!"

"Bat what?" the smith said stupidly.

"Accident. A bad accident!"

The smith shook his head.

Benton was talking fast to the crowd. "Jerked that rope right out of my hand! I've got to sell this horse off. Going to turn killer on me if I don't!"

"You ain't had trouble with him before. Benton—" somebody suggested curiously.

"Been a long time since there's been an election, too," Benton said thinly. "But one's come around, just the same!"

The hint was scarcely veiled. Faces whitened and lips tightened. But no one took up the mocking challenge in Benton's eyes. He shouldered out onto the street and turned as though he might be headed for the Old Home. There was a passage through the crowd in that direction. But Defever filled it. And when the man confronted him, Chris did not move. Benton

paused, then shoved forward, intending to shoulder Chris out of the way. Chris struck with an eye to accuracy.

The squared bludgeon of his fist caught Benton, not on the point of his chin, but flush on the tip of his straight and rather handsome nose. It was a powerful blow, followed through by all of Defever's disguised but considerable weight. The nose spread over the man's face and ran redly down the front of his shirt. He reeled off of the walk and fell heavily in a flat sprawl in the dust.

The crowd stared. Chris bent close to the ear of the man nearest to him.

"A nervous affliction—" he whispered confidentially, making the explanation much like the one Benton had used for the loosened kick rope. "My mother was frightened by a polling-booth. Elections always bring it on!"

The man to whom he had whispered stared as Chris moved off. Then he suddenly understood. He laughed. When Chris looked back over his shoulder, Benton lay still in the dust and the man to whom Chris had whispered was sharing his joke with the rest of the crowd.

AND there was something else which brought a tight smile of satisfaction to Defever's lips. The two who had followed him from the hotel had lingered at the smithy. They were, in fact, trying to assist the still limp Benton to his feet.

It was, Chris reflected, a fine, large morning. And he chafed his hands together delightedly. He needed now but an amber glass of Roanoke to warm his belly as thoroughly as the cockles of his heart. To this end, he turned through the doors of the Old Home.

Gus Thibault's headquarters was a like-ly-appearing emporium. It had an imported bar of impressive length and polish, a fine jointed mirror, and a back-bar decorated with a fine assortment of bottled beauty. The gaming tables were big, well felted, and set about with comfortable, wire braced arm chairs. There was a piano with surprisingly few keys missing and a small platform from which a spangled nightingale might give forth song if trade warranted it.

Chris ordered his drink and tilted it

when he was served with the relish of a man who well knows the value of the good things in life. He had but barely sniffed of his second glass when a hand touched his shoulder. A ferret faced house man stood there.

"Defever?" the man queried softly. Chris nodded.

"The boss wants to see you. In the back room."

The house man jerked his head toward a heavy door at the rear. Loth to leave the nectar to which he had but set his lips, Chris carried his glass along. He moved to the back door, knocked lightly, and stepped through the opening. Thibault was at a huge square desk. Two or three others were sprawled in chairs about the room. Thibault looked up sharply.

"You're getting a slow start, Defever!" he growled. "Polls open at noon tomorrow. And I haven't heard a peep out of you. You're supposed to be out there on the street right now, making a spiel. What's the matter? Can't you deliver?"

Chris drew himself up haughtily. So this crass gambler doubted the histrionic ability of his hireling. Well enough—he'd get a sample, right now! Defever's chest swelled with a huge intake of breath. His feet set themselves firmly. He removed his hat with a flourish which brought it to rest in the crook of his arm. His left hand raised in an upward and outward sweep of grace.

"Sirs!" he said. "I come before you, an honest man, speaking on behalf of an honest man—"

Chris stopped, bewildered. One night he had broken an exit window in the opera house in Springfield with the thunder of his voice. He had used its full volume here. Yet all that issued from between his lips was a thin and squeaking whisper! He tried again, setting himself more solidly.

"Gentlemen!"

The sound barely carried across the room!

Defever's hand went to his valiantly working Adam's-apple. His voice was gone! Love of the saints—he was disarmed!

"What the devil's the matter with you?" Thibault barked. "Swallow a frog?"

A panic flooded Chris. By the thin gods of the theatre! Defever without a voice!

He was stripped of his virility—at the mercy of the chill winds of adversity. And he felt such a wind beginning to blow from Thibault's direction.

"You knock-kneed old fool!" the gambler swore disgustedly. "And I advanced a hundred dollars on that whiskey whisper! What kind of speeches could you make with that wheeze? Get out of here! But wait a minute—boys, I've been clipped! There's a hundred dollar bill in one of those pockets. Get it—and see Mister Defever to the door!"

The idlers in the room closed on Chris. He fought back, out of principle. But his heart was not in it. He was too staggered by the blow dealt underhandedly by Fate. Tim Higby was the cause of this. Tim Higby and his clumsily swinging fist. He'd pay. By the sainted shadow of Shakespeare, he'd pay full measure!

Thibault's men were thorough—and rough. Chris was plundered of the hundred iron men he'd had in advance. He was carried bodily—kicking and wheezing oaths which, if they had been audible, would have curdled the whiskey on the Old Home backbar—out through the saloon. And he passed through the front door in sailing fight to land heavily in the dust of the roadway across the walk.

Benton, his face covered by a bloody handkerchief, was just turning in to report to his boss. He laughed savagely as Chris rose painfully to his feet and started brushing himself off.

"Better start running!" Benton said. "Far, fast—and quick!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Electioneering—By Defever

CHRIS headed for the News building and Tim Higby like a riverboat under a popping head of steam. But by the time he had crossed the street, he was beginning to view matters in their broader aspects. For instance, his connection with Gus Thibault—and his three hundred dollar fee—was now permanently severed.

His visions of enjoying a period of ease and luxury on the proceeds of his efforts in this town were destroyed. But like many things, elections had two sides. And Hig-

by had admitted to his friend Seymour, outside of Defever's window the night before, that he was still half a mind to enlist Defever's aid.

A man's pride was an awkward thing, difficult to swallow. And Chris had never been a man to easily forgive those who had done him injury. But there were few things he could not do if profit was involved. He began soothing himself in preparation for his talk with Higby.

But when he reached the News office, the printer was not there. The girl—Ruth, his niece—was at Higby's table. And young Bud Hale was leaning over her. Hale straightened with a look of annoyance when Chris came in the door.

Chris had not succeeded in brushing all the mire of the street from his clothes and he was somewhat disturbed at this until he remembered that his girl had seen him in even less becoming dress the night before. He bent his most engaging smile onto his lips. And he offered her a short bow which was not without a flattering sort of grace.

"Good day, Miss Higby," he offered in the maddening whisper which now cursed him.

The girl frowned.

"Haven't we had enough of you?" she asked pointedly.

"I had thought to talk with your uncle. He should not be about unescorted on the street today."

"My uncle doesn't like second-hand warnings. If Gus Thibault wants to scare him, tell him to come down here himself!" the girl snapped. Turning on her heel, she passed through a door into the back part of the office.

Chris looked after her regretfully. He did not always enjoy the favor of the fair. But seldom was he subject to such scornful venom. Bud Hale spoke more kindly.

"Finished up with Thibault, eh?" he asked. "I saw you get tossed out of the Old Home. He's a bad customer. You're better done with him."

Hale stopped, saw Defever was not yet satisfied in his quest of information.

"Don't take Ruthie too seriously. It's been a bad morning. Ed Carter, the smith, got his head stove up a while ago. Then something fell off a top shelf on Ben Seymour while he was working in his stock-

room. They say he's bad hurt. And there was a sticker on the box said to vote for Thibault. Funny kind of accident. Tim went down to Ben's to see how it was. And he was snortin' mad. Get one Higby in a stew and you've got 'em all smoking. That's the way it is with Ruthie."

Chris nodded earnestly.

"There'll be more accidents. That's what I meant. Tim should stay in his office—along with you and his niece. And you should watch sharp, very sharp. Now, I have good eyes and I am temporarily free of duty—"

"For hire, eh?" Hale asked amusedly. "Jack-of-all trades, it sounds like, De-fever."

Chris scowled.

"The old adage runs: *Jack of all trades, master of none*. That, Sir, does not apply to me! I could sell you safety and perhaps a few votes. The price would not come high and the work would be well done."

The speech lost most of its force in the quavering whisper which emanated from De-fever's lips. And it did not touch young Hale. He laughed tolerantly.

"Thibault's not going to touch Tim Higby. Tim's one of the props of this town. And he has friends!"

"Friends!" Chris wheezed scornfully. "*Who knows his friends until he is dead; and how may they serve him, then? An ounce of prevention*, Sir, at a modest price—"

Hale shook his head, annoyance beginning to show.

"Listen, you two-penny old bum, maybe Tim and Ruthie and me need help. Maybe Thibault will scare the weak knees in this town so bad he'll get his votes. And maybe he'll nail our hides to a fence. But if he does, he'll have a chore. And we don't need any wheezing old faker to back us! Now, get out of here and stay out. Keep out of my way and keep out of Tim's!"

"*Youth and folly, infant twins!*" De-fever whispered hoarsely. And he turned again onto the street.

A BARREL sat against a wall between two buildings opposite the Old Home. Chris took refuge on this, still muttering soundlessly to himself. A witch's curse on this town! It lacked even the common civilities. It would not

heed a man ready to do sound business.

The devil—if he had his voice back he'd have made young Hale listen! He'd have made even the scornful beauty of Higby's niece melt in the fires of his persuasion. And he'd have made a deal which would have realized him some profit for the troubles to which he had been subjected.

As it was—like Samson shorn of his locks—he was voiceless and therefore at the mercy of lesser men. It was a bitter thing. Yet there must be some salvation. Some devious route by which modest fortune could yet be courted. His brows wrinkled heavily with thought.

He brightened suddenly. Behind him, apparently in the alley, two men were talking guardedly. That their voices were subdued, hinting at secret matters, was enough to draw Chris. He slid from his barrel and worked soundlessly back through the passage between the buildings, coming up at a high board fence beyond which the two men stood. Their voices were plain.

"Higby just left Seymour's store. And he's fighting mad. He's apt to stir up some of the yellow-bellies we've got buffaloe'd. The boss wants him taken care of. Can you handle it alone, Cassidy?"

The other man snorted.

"For fifty bucks I could hand-whip a catamount! They'll plant old Higby to-night and his own niece won't know him when they do!"

"Easy!" the first man cautioned. "Here's the fifty. But go light on Tim. Rough him up. Make him see sense. But don't go too far. Gus has got his eye on that gal and he'd have your hair if you queered his chances with her after this all blows over. Watch Tim. He worked sections on the railroad before he bought his paper. He's handy!"

"So'm I!" the man called Cassidy answered drily. "He'll walk and talk when I'm through with him. But damned little else!"

The first man chuckled approval. There was some small parting talk. Chris ducked behind a weathered packing case cluttering the lot in which he stood. A moment later Benton, his nose plastered with reddened bandaging, appeared and walked swiftly back toward the street.

When he was gone, Chris rose and ducked behind the fence. Up lots a hun-



The Lost Word

THE KEY TO SECRET WISDOM

"Like a bolt from the heavens, the word was spoken and from the reverberations of its sacred syllables, came the creation of the Universe"—so relates an old, old legend. Through the ages men have searched in vain for this lost word. In its stead they found keys to a secret wisdom. They learned how to unlock the hidden possibilities slumbering within everyone... startling, unused powers that make for a greater life.

This Sealed Book—FREE

A sealed book by the Rosicrucians, reveals the plan whereby you may obtain this wealth of knowledge leading to the greater joys and rewards of living. For free copy without obligation, write Scribe B.A.G.

THE ROSICRUCIANS
SAN JOSE (AMOC) CALIFORNIA
NOT a religious organization

WHAT TO DO FOR SO-CALLED

RHEUMATIC PAIN

Arms ache?
Back feel stiff?
Sore all over?
Get Sayman
Liniment and massage on gently. Starts to work FAST. Helps to loosen "tight" muscles. To relieve stiffness, soreness. To ease pain while breaking up congestion due to over-exertion, exposure or fatigue. You'll say it's WONDERFUL! Only 50c. All druggists.

SAYMAN LINIMENT
Made by the Makers of SAYMAN SALVE

**EASY PAYMENT PLAN
LIFE INSURANCE**

New low-cost "buy-by-mail" Budget Plan enables you to own Life Insurance backed by Legal Reserves, to suit your pocketbook! You don't have to pay more than you can afford for reliable protection. Policy provides full benefits for as little as 5c a week! 10c a week pays double benefits; 15c pays triple benefits, etc. So economical, so easy to own, you and every member of the family can afford an individual Pioneer Life Insurance Policy! No Red Tape—NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION! No agent will call. Get complete details FREE! Write today.

PIONEER LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
1451 Pioneer Building • Rockford, Illinois

AS LITTLE AS
5c
WEEKLY

Policy Provides

DEATH BENEFITS
Due to Sickness or Natural Causes

DOUBLE INDEMNITY
For Accidental Death

TOTAL DISABILITY

CASH SURRENDER VALUE

EXTENDED INSURANCE
Other Liberal Benefits

dred yards a thin man Chris recognized as a customer earlier in the Old Home, was moving briskly toward the upper end of town. Chris followed him.

The fellow moved up purposely almost to the hotel, then ducked out toward the street where a space between another pair of buildings gave access to the walk. Chris halted out of sight at the alley end of this space and waited. Thibault's man paused at the edge of the walk, craned his head out for a view of the street, and drew hastily back. Sharp steps sounded on the walk. A short, hurrying figure plunged into view. Thibault's man snapped out a single word:

"Higby!"

The hurrying figure stopped and veered half into the space between the buildings in answer to the hail. The thin man hit him a measured blow—strong enough to stun any outtry but not hard enough to knock Higby from his feet. He seized Tim's arm and steered his staggering steps toward the alley where there was a weed-grown square invisible from the street.

Chris dropped to his haunches out of sight in the weeds. Higby began to come around. He squirmed and swung one of his powerful, clumsy punches at his attacker. The man avoided it nimbly.

"So you'll run young Hale against Thibault, eh? It ain't smart, Tim!"

He punctuated this advice with a short, chopping blow to Higby's face. Tim grunted and swung wide again.

"So you're a sandy, stubborn woolly on the prod and you ain't afraid of hell!" his captor mocked. "That ain't smart either!"

The chopping hand stroked again.

In all, Thibault's man asked a dozen hammering, mocking questions. And he did the accompanying hand work well. There was fight in old Tim. But it ebbed under the punishment dealt out to him. At last he was sagging half to his knees. Thibault's man shoved him away, then, and started for the street, dusting his knuckles. The gods, turning briefly gracious, led him agreeably close to the place where Defever crouched.

Chris had only to rise as the man passed and make a single straight stroke with one of the derringers from his vest. It was nicely calculated and dropped the fellow

BOOTHILL'S ELECTION DAY

without a sound. Chris had an eye for where a man might keep his funds. The wad of bills totalling fifty dollars was in his shirt pocket, the first which Chris tried.

Defever straightened the bills, counted them, and slid them into his shabby and flattened wallet. This was, he reflected, not so bad. He had been provided with a just revenge on Higby for the blow which had robbed him of his voice.

He doubted if he, himself, could have done a better job of attrition on the printer. And he had realized a little profit on the transaction without expending effort. Moreover, there was yet other violence in store for this town before its political kettle ceased to boil.

Chris was not finicky over the sources of his income. A man fared best who was not. But there was a certain satisfaction in this mode of filling his needy purse. He was defending Brass City from the devil—the at the devil's own expense.

He squatted on his heels and waited for the panting, dazed Higby to recover himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conceded Vote

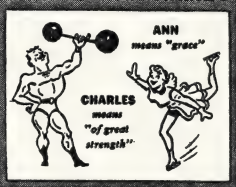
HIGBY was sulphurous, and more so when he saw Chris squatting beside him. "So it was you!" he roared. "You stabber in the back! By the bloody bells of doom, I'll have your hide for my office floor for this!"

Chris had trouble inserting his whisper into the tirade.

"My handiwork doesn't talk when I'm finished!" he said shortly. "You'll find a sample there in the weeds. You, Sir, owe me an apology. You had the discourtesy to doubt both my motives and my ability. Your niece and your candidate were uncivil when I called at your place of business. I have been shabbily treated in this hamlet. But it will never be said that Christian Defever avoided the course of right or the cause of the just! In the name of common humanity, I have taken a stake in your petty politics!"

Higby bent over the prostrate form of Thibault's hireling. He straightened with wonderment.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



You'll be surprised at the meanings of some of your friends' names. Have fun looking them up in "WHAT'S IN A NAME?" — the new cartoon-illustrated book that everybody's talking about.

The Ethyl Corporation would like to send you this fascinating booklet *free* because we think it will help you to remember our name and what it means:

Send the coupon below for free booklet that tells the meaning of nearly 1000 names.



"WHAT'S IN A NAME?"

Dept. PL3, Box 53, New York City.

Please send me a free copy of "What's in a Name?"

Name.....
(PLEASE PRINT)

Address.....

City & State.....

Paper Fights for Victory!

Paper was only a curiosity to the men who signed the Magna Charta—but in 1944, it is a vital weapon. It is used for cartridge cases, to wrap iron rations, for hundreds of other military purposes.

The supply is limited, and you can help conserve it. Do these things:

1. Cooperate with the paper drives in your city.
2. Accept purchases unwrapped whenever possible.
3. Don't waste paper!

New 3 in 1 Policy
Only \$1 A MONTH
REAL PROTECTION
ACCIDENT Benefits
LOSS of TIME Benefits
SICKNESS Benefits
Benefits while in HOSPITAL

SICKNESS ACCIDENT HOSPITALIZATION
 All three in one

Policy Pays Benefits Up To:
\$5,000.00
 Accumulated Cash for Accidental Loss of Life, Limb or Sight

\$150.00
 A month for Accidental Disability

\$100.00
 A month for Loss of Time

\$7.50 EACH DAY

Don't take dangerous chances! Why risk your savings, perhaps your future, when just a few pennies a day pays for real protection? 3-in-1 policy pays liberal benefits from **FIRST DAY!** Even covers common sicknesses and ordinary accidents. No agents, no red tape, no medical examination. Mail-plan cuts expenses, gives you greater insurance value. **Investigate at once.** No obligation. Write for **FREE** details today. **GEORGE ROGERS CLARK CASUALTY CO.**
 Dept. 38-E • Rockford, Ill.

STAMMER?

This new 125-page book, "Stammering, its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for self-correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 45 years.
Benj. N. Bogue, Dept. 2954, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

GET THIS
FREE
 BOOK!

"The Book They're Talking About"

ART ANATOMY OF THE HUMAN FIGURE

By **CHARLES CARLSON**

For the amateur and professional artist. Contains over 350 illustrations, charts and notes, giving detailed study of every part of the body. **MALE and FEMALE POSED and IN ACTION.**

Price Only \$1.00

ENRIGHT CO., DEPT. PM-1, BOX 45 MORRIS HEIGHTS STA., NEW YORK

EXTRA GASOLINE Mileage For RATIONED MOTORISTS

 Now you can get up to 30% extra gasoline mileage with a Vacu-matic test on your car. Quicker pick-up, smoother running, added power and precious gasoline savings guaranteed.

AUTOMATIC SUPERCHARGE PRINCIPLE
 Vacu-matic is entirely different! Operates on the Supercharge principle. Saves gas. Automatically provides a better gas mixture. Guaranteed to give up to 30% extra gas mileage, more power and better performance.

FITS ALL CARS AGENTS Get Yours FREE
 Constructed of six parts, based on a single unit. Adjusted and sealed at the factory. Very quickly installed by anyone.
Vacu-matic Co., 7817 • 914 State St., Wauwatosa 13, Wis.

"I'm damned!" he muttered. Then his eyes narrowed. "What do you expect out of this?" he demanded suspiciously.

Defever's fingers patted the wallet in his pocket.

"From you—nothing!" he said with complete honesty. "Now, get back to your office and keep off the street. Keep your niece and the next mayor of this village with you."

"For today, all right!" Higby agreed, still eyeing Chris with distrusting wonderment. "But we're not going to wait till tomorrow to thrash this out. When the vote comes, it's going to be peaceable. We're holding a rally tonight. We're going to prod this town into saving its skin or we're going to take a whipping! If Thibault want's to fight dirty, he'll have to do it where everybody can see him!"

Higby shook his head to clear it, found his hat, and moved unsteadily back to the walk. Chris watched him go thoughtfully. At first thought, a rally was bad business. At second, it was smart. A showdown in any tangle should not be delayed too long. Tonight would be a good time. But it meant he would have to work swiftly if he was to act at all.

To this end he idled among the weeds until the stunned Cassidy began to regain consciousness. When he was convinced the man's head had cleared enough to identify the man who had cut him down, Chris stepped past him and moved leisurely onto the street.

The walks were fast assuming an air of uneasiness, of impending strife. It was especially marked among the women still along the street. What errands they had, they swiftly accomplished and hurried on. This was, in itself, a sign of tension. Chris had long noted that when a woman ignored the temptation of browsing shops and gossip with her neighbors, trouble was afoot in fact.

Behind him Cassidy crossed the street and ducked into the Old Home. Benton came to the walk a little later, then turned back. After this Chris caught a glimpse of a gun-hung youngster sliding along the alley behind the opposite buildings, keeping abreast of him. Feeling agreeable and scenting further business to be done. Chris contrived to be curious about matters at

BOOTHILL'S ELECTION DAY

the town corral at the head of the street.

The youngster found him there, suddenly appearing around a corner when Chris was caught in an enclosed ell formed by the wings of an empty and apparently long unused barn. This boy had the slight body and the smooth, tight skin of youth. But he had an old and hard face.

Chris knew what this was. Benton had reported. Cassidy had reported. And Thibault was a little nervous. He wanted the orator he had fired out of the way. This gun-hung boy had drawn the job. There was a flatness in his eyes which promised he would do it. Chris felt a little cool. And very uneasy.

The boy jerked his head toward the door of the big barn.

"In there!" he said.

Chris moved obediently, watching the thin, taloned hands hanging so tensely on raw nerves above the holstered guns. He knew a lot about this boy. He had been born without a soul and a yellow pride. He wanted glory—great chunks of it. He had practiced with those guns until they obeyed him with flawless speed. He wanted glory and he'd trade lives for it heedlessly—any life but his own.

"What's your name, son?" he asked as he stepped into the darkened interior of the barn.

"The Puerco Kid."

"A mere *nom de plume*!" Chris said.

"Your real name."

"Dover. Get over there against the wall. And turn your back!"

The kid was cold. There was no good in him. Chris saw the edge of chance was too finely drawn, here. He sighed regretfully. A small snake, he comforted himself, was still a snake. He moved toward the wall as directed. He heard a movement and knew the kid had palmed one of the tied-down guns.

DEFEVER'S body was lank. His clothes fitted loosely. Fine movement could not be detected. His derringeer came from his vest into his hand. He wheeled and raised the weapon. And he did this between the blinks by which the kid was trying to accustom his eyes to the darkness of the barn.

The tight nerves served the kid well.



Get into **RADIO** **ELECTRONICS** **TELEVISION** now!

SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING
Your opportunity is here. Radio technicians needed everywhere—abroad in action and at home in industry. Get into Radio—now which embraces Radio, Electronics and Television. National Schools offers tested home training method—actual extension of training you would receive if attending school overseas.

FREE LESSON AND OPPORTUNITY BOOK
Mail Coupon for full details and Free Books
2 BOOKS FREE
NATIONAL SCHOOLS
Est. 1908
Los Angeles

MAIL COUPON FOR BOOK & LESSON

National Schools, Dept. B-PPE
4000 So. Figueroa, Los Angeles, Calif. (Mail in envelope or paste on penny post)

Mail me FREE, without obligation, one Lesson and Opportunity Book, with full details about how I CAN become a RADIO Technician.

NAME _____ AGE _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

SWEDISH MASSAGE 16 TO 80—Many Swedish Massage graduates make \$50, \$75 or even more per week. Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanitariums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma, Anatomy Charts and Massage Illustrated Book FREE—Now! The College of Swedish Massage Dept. 898A, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11

POEMS WANTED

To be set to music. Send your song poem today for free examination by nationally famous hit composer, who has had over 325 songs published. Our new 6 step plan is most liberal and complete ever offered. Write today for free booklet.
SCREENLAND RECORDERS, Dept. P, Hollywood 28, California

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!"

There's a Thrill in Bringing a Crook to Justice Through Scientific CRIME DETECTION!

I have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let me teach you, too, in your own home. Learn Fingerprinting, Firearms Identification, Police Photography and Secret Service Methods thoroughly, quickly and

at small cost.
53% of All American Bureaus of Identification employ students or graduates of I.A.S. You, too, can fit yourself to fill a responsible crime detection job with good pay and steady employment. But don't delay—get the details now. Let me show you how easily and completely you can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time, in your own home. You may pay as you learn. Write today... Now... Be sure to state age.
INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
3328 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7935, Chicago, Ill.



Be A FINGER PRINT Expert

FREE!!!
Send for Thrilling "BLUE BOOK" OF CRIME

IT SPELLS TOPS!

Action!

Romance!

Glorious Adventure!

Outstandingly different

Stories and articles by

Your favorite authors!



The new **Argosy** is the answer to the discriminating armchair adventurer's reading problem. Here, for twenty-five cents, the world is yours—on a whirlwind fiction cruise guided by the leading writers of our day. Be sure to get the big May issue and read the memorable contributions—dramatic, entertaining, significant—by C. P. Donnel, Jr., Leland Stowe, Major George Fielding Eliot, Walter Brooks, Joseph Marshall, Will Jenkins and many other distinguished authors.

May **Argosy** on sale April 7

His piece fired ahead of Defever's. But he was shaken. The slug scored Defever's ribs without breaking the skin. The derringer spoke surely and the Puerco Kid went down like a candle in an oven.

Chris found another fifty dollars in a tobacco pocket. He lifted the Kid to his shoulders and stepped out into the sunlight. The cavernous interior of the barn appeared to have muffled the closely-spaced shots. Grass City viewed him with surprise as he carried his burden down the street. Men within opened the doors of the Old Home for him when he approached. He strode through them and dropped the Kid unceremoniously onto the bar in front of Gus Thibault.

The boss gambler stared at the limp body. Defever's derringers made clean holes which bled little. The Puerco Kid showed no signs of injury. He was just dead. Thibault had difficulty accepting the fact.

Defever took out his derringer, punched the spent shell free, and thrust a fresh charge into the chamber.

"Good man, Thibault," he observed instructively, "come high! Fifty dollars! The same price for a rural editor and a member of my splendid profession. You've shown poor judgment, Sir!"

Chris backed to the door, then, smiling pleasantly, and stepped onto the street. He kept his attention on the door of the saloon until he reached the steps of the hotel. But no move was made to track him.

It was midafternoon and Defever found himself hungry. He took a table in the dining room of the Valley Inn and stared at the thumb-printed menu. But his thoughts were momentarily not on food.

"Benton and Cassidy and Dover—'B,' 'C,' and 'D'" he muttered to himself. "Where the hell is 'A'?"

Chris ate a condemned man's meal. When it was finished he felt sated and in need of a nap. There was, he thought, needless risk in appearing further on the street in daylight. Tim Higby's rally was apt to bring a brisk rush of business. The wise course was to await this. He went to his room. Awaking a little after full dark, he quitted the hotel by his window and the back stairs. He marked a sizable fire burning at the upper end of town and headed for it.

GRAY HAIR VITAMIN NOW \$1.95

No dyes—No drugs—Hair grew out in Natural Color in almost nine out of ten test cases just taking one tablet Calcium Pantothenate Vitamin each day. Why pay \$8.50 to \$5.00 for the famous "Gray Hair Vitamin" that gave such amazing results? **SEND NO MONEY.** Just send name and address. We will ship 100 10-mg. tablets (100 days' supply) genuine standard quality Calcium Pantothenate Vitamin C.O.D. for \$1.95 plus few cents postage. Guaranteed same quality as used in National Tests or money back. **LILEE PROD. CO.,** 2017 S. MICHIGAN AVE., DEPT. 1435, CHICAGO, ILL.

BOOTHILL'S ELECTION DAY

When he reached the blaze he found two or three men hunched disconsolately with canvas wrapped brass band pieces across their knees and a worried boy who tended the huge and inviting fire.

"I was advised there would be merry-making and a rally here tonight—" Chris suggested.

"This is it," one of the bandmen said.

"You ain't seen Mr. Higby, have you, Mister?" the boy tending the fire asked nervously. Said he'd be here half an hour ago. There was a little crowd, but it slid off. I been down to his house and the paper, but both is dark. He ain't to be had, nor Miss Ruth nor Mister Hale. And I don't know what to do about this fire. Ain't no fun burnin' it just for me!"

Chris caught the youngster's arm.

"Higby isn't at home or his office—and his niece and young Hal are missing, too?" he wheezed. "The devil!"

His eyes swung toward the Old Home. It looked peaceful. Too peaceful. He turned back to the boy and pointed at a tin sitting beyond the blaze.

"What's in that, kerosene?"

"Yes sir. It's right full and heavy. I carried it up here."

Chris nodded.

"We'll just take it along. The trouble is, this fire's too far from town and it isn't big enough. You look sleepy, son. You get along home. I'll tell Higby you did a good job for him."

The boy looked his gratitude and trotted off. Chris picked up the tin of kerosene. A man with a bass horn on his knee eyed him curiously and with a touch of hope.

"You going where I think you might with that?" he asked.

Chris nodded. The man with the bass horn stood up.

"I'm going to get us some company. And then I'm coming back. I wouldn't want to miss that!"

"Bring your horn!" Chris called.

Delever moved obliquely with the kerosene and with some haste in order to reach his objective before word could stray into the Old Home. Thibault's faction appeared to be throwing their own celebration within the saloon. There was much ribald laughter. He noted that windows at the back were lighted but heavily curtained.



CASH
WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST

AMAZING **NEW**
GOLD SEAL
POLICY
COSTS LESS THAN \$1 a month

PAYS accumulated **ACCIDENT BENEFITS** \$**6000.00**
for Accidental Loss of Life, Limb, or Sight up to

For LOSS OF TIME! \$**2400.00**
Accident Disability Benefits up to \$100 a month for as long as 24 months, or

SICKNESS BENEFITS \$**100.00** PER MO.
For Loss of Time due to Sickness, a maximum Monthly Income of

HOSPITAL EXPENSES \$**650.00**
for Sickness or Accident, including \$5.00 a day for hospital room, up to

All Around PROTECTION! . . . Accidents happen to 20 persons every minute of every day; and sickness strikes when least expected. So why take chances? NOW you can have all-around insurance protection, backed by an old-line LEGAL RESERVE Company for less than \$1 a month. Policy pays for ALL accidents, ALL the common sicknesses, even for minor injuries; and disability benefits start from very first day.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION required!
No red tape! Policy issued BY MAIL, at BIG SAVINGS. Ages 15 to 69. Actual Policy sent for 10 Days' FREE Examination. ACT NOW! Write for it today. No cost. No obligation. No salesman will call.

FREE 10-Day Inspection Coupon

THE SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
453A Service Life Bldg. Omaha, Nebr.
Without cost or obligation, send your GOLD SEAL \$1-A-MONTH Policy for 10 DAYS' FREE INSPECTION.

Name _____
Address _____ Age _____
City _____ State _____
Beneficiary _____

Gas on Stomach

Relieved in 5 minutes or
double your money back

When excess stomach acid causes painful, suffocating gas, sour stomach and heartburn, doctors usually prescribe the fastest-acting medicine known for symptomatic relief—medicines like those in Bell-ans Tablets. No laxative. Bell-ans brings comfort in a jiffy or double your money back on return of bottle to us. 25c everywhere.

WELCOME RELIEF FROM ASTHMATIC ATTACKS



For more than 75 years, people have relied upon Dr. Guild's GREEN MOUNTAIN ASTHMATIC COMPOUND to get welcome relief from asthmatic misery. 24 cigarettes, only 50¢. Powder, 25¢ and \$1.00 at nearly all drug stores. Write today for FREE SAMPLE. The J. H. Guild Co., Dept. K-1, Rupert, Vermont. Use only as directed on package.

STOP RADIO STATIC



The ALL WAVE radio filter is guaranteed to help you get perfect radio reception. Eliminates all hums, clicks, crackles, etc., caused by electric razors, vacuum cleaners, motors and other electrical appliances. The ALL WAVE is a scientific and compact radio filter that can be used on any make electric radio. To connect, just put your radio plug thru the ALL WAVE's slotted opening and into any wall outlet. 15 DAY FREE TRIAL. Send C.O.D. for \$1.50 plus postage. Cash orders sent postpaid. Rush order—supply limited. Vogue Eliminator Co., 7759 S. Halsted, Dept. A-130, Chicago 20, Ill.

SUFFERERS FROM PSORIASIS (SCALY SKIN TROUBLE) MAKE THE ONE SPOT TEST



Don't mistake ointment for the stubborn, ugly, embarrassing scaly skin disease Psoriasis. Apply non-staining Dermol. Thousands do for spots on body or scalp. Grateful users, often after years of suffering, report the scales have gone, the red patches gradually disappeared and they enjoyed the thrill of a clear skin again. Dermol is used by many doctors and is backed by a positive agreement to give definite benefit in 2 weeks or money refunded without question. Send 10c (stamps or coin) for generous trial bottle to make our famous "One Spot Test." Test it yourself. Results may surprise you. Write today for your test bottle. Caution: Use only as directed. Print name plainly. Don't delay. Sold by Liggett and Walgreen Drug Stores and leading Druggists. LIGGETT AND WALGREEN, Box 547, Northwestern Station, Dept. 432, Detroit 4, Mich.

Prove it yourself no matter how long you have suffered or what you have tried. Beautiful book on Psoriasis and Dermol with amazing, true photographic proof of results sent FREE. Write for it.

SEND FOR
GENEROUS
TRIAL
SIZE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

When he began spilling oil from the tin, he was careful to avoid this section. But in a matter of minutes he had thoroughly soaked the base of every other wall of the building. The man with the bass horn came back. A few others were with him. Two or three also carried instruments.

"If you're wrong about where Higby and Ruth and Bud Hale are, you're going to be a scarce chicken, brother!" the man with the bass horn said.

"Afraid to light a match?" Defever asked him.

The man shook his head. Two others volunteered. Chris pointed stations to them about the building.

"Touch off when you hear my shot—and keep out of sight until then!"

THEY nodded and Chris slid into the darkness at the back of the Old Home. A man was on guard there. Chris stopped around the corner from him and tossed a rock onto the slanting roof.

When he looked up, startled, Chris stepped around the corner and brought his gun down hard. He caught the sagging body, lowered it, assessing the man's pockets as he did so. It did not feel like a rich haul. But it was Thibault money, so it was good enough.

The door gave easily under Defever's hand. He stepped into a hall, off of which doors opened two ways and a larger door closed the far end. Midway down the hall a bright circle-wick lamp hung in a bracket. He cut down on it with one of his guns and snuffed it with a shot which also shattered its oil reservoir, spilling a cascade of

High School Course at Home Many Finish in 2 Years

Complete rapidly on your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credits for H.S. applicants already completed. Eligible subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped and go to a high school graduate. Start your building now. Free literature on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H540, Drexel at 56th, Chicago 37



New ENLARGEMENT

Just to get acquainted, we will beautifully enlarge your favorite snapshot, photo, Kodak picture, or negative to 5 1/2 inches, if you enclose this ad with a 3c stamp for return mailing. Please include color of hair and eyes and get our new Bargain Offer giving you your choice of handsome frames with a second enlargement beautifully hapt times in natural lifelike colors and sent on approval. Your original returned with your enlargement. Send today.

DEAN STUDIOS, Dept. 778, 213 W. 7th St., Des Moines, Iowa



BOOTHILL'S ELECTION DAY

running flame onto the floor. His derringers were big guns. Chris had no fear the men with matches had not heard.

Sound was suddenly blanketed out for an instant in the front section of the Old Home. Then the thunder of hurrying feet started toward the rear. Chris flung his weight against a door giving into the hall. Its lock shattered with the second lunge and he staggered into a room which held Tim Higby and his niece and Bud Hale, all three securely gagged and bound. Lightning hands produced a huge clasp-knife from Defever's pocket. He cut the girl's wrist-bonds and thrust the handle of the blade into her hands. Wheeling, he plowed out into the hall again.

Shouts were welling up throughout the Old Home. The big door at the head of the hall had been banged opened. Three men were kicking wildly at the flames running over the floor there.

Benton saw him first and bleated angrily. At the same time, he flung up his gun and sent a shot through the growing flames. It bowled Defever's hat from his head. He centered on Benton and saw the man stagger against the back wall, fight to hold himself up, and go down slowly. But Thibault and his other gunman had cleared iron in the pause Benton made from them. They fired together, both slugs hit Defever.

Chris felt their impact and stepped back to absorb it. Shoulder and thigh, he thought. He fired another chamber, missed, and fired again. The two shots ran swiftly together. The man beside Thibault sat down slowly.

Thibault ducked into the outer room of the Old Home. But he was back in a moment, his eyes wild. The sound of breaking glass and the growing crackle of flame was at his back. Chris had a glimpse of Cassidy, bracing a scattergun across his hip. Fearful that the Higbys and young Hale would pile out of their prison into this melee at any moment, he tagged Cassidy. And Thibault hit him again.

Chris had to sit down after this. He heard footsteps behind him and thought the Higbys were getting clear. Thibault wavered before his eyes. He emptied one gun, drew the other, and slowly emptied it. He put both of them on the floor. A swift, up-reaching blackness swallowed him.

Read AUDEL'S MECHANICS GUIDES for profit

15 MINUTES A DAY

Subjects: DIESELS, PUMPS, WELDING, MACHINE SHOP, AUTO SERVICE, ELECTRIC WORK, REFRIGERATION, STEAM ENGINES, CALCULATING, SHEET METAL, PIPING, RADIO, DRAWING, DICTIONARY, WIRING.

Every Mechanic can Step Up his Skill with AUDEL'S GUIDES. Containing Practical Inside Information in a Handy Form, Covers facts and figures of your Trade. All illustrated and explained. Books sent to you for 7 Days Free Examination. Send No Money—Nothing to Pay Postman. Check and Mail Coupon Today.

MAIL ORDER

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., New York 19

Mail for 7 days free trial books marked (X). I agree to mail \$1 in 7 days on each book ordered and \$1 a month until purchase price is paid. If I am not satisfied with guides, I will return them.

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| ☐ WELDERS \$1. | ☐ AUTOMOBILE \$4. | ☐ SHIPWRIGHT \$1. |
| ☐ BLUEPRINT 2. | ☐ RADIO 4. | ☐ MATHEMATICS 2. |
| ☐ MACHINIST 4. | ☐ PLUMBERS 1. | ☐ CARPENTERS 2. |
| ☐ ELECTRICITY 4. | ☐ SHEET METAL 1. | ☐ DIESEL 2. |



Name _____

Address _____

Employed by _____



Appear **SLIMMER**
Look **YOUNGER**
Feel **BETTER**
Instantly!

Don't let them talk about your "Belly Window"—stay slenderized with this amazing free-action, ever comfortable, elastic woven garment!

"INTERLOCKING HANDS" Sensational NEW PRINCIPLE of Abdominal Support

Clasp hands over abdomen, as in picture—raise and press gently—notice how much better you feel! Sturdy non-stretch fabric is BUILT IN with the two-way stretch weave of the Commander for EXTRA DOUBBLE SUPPORT across the abdomen. Instantly the Commander flattens your "Corporation"—BRACES YOUR BACK—improves your posture!

TRY IT 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE
Send coupon—wear the Commander TEN DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE—if you do not get all the results you expect, return it and YOUR MONEY WILL BE REFUNDED.

MAIL COUPON NOW

Ward Green Company, Dept. B-248
342 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.
Send me Commander Supporters for Free Trial. I will pay postman \$2.98 plus postage. (Sizes 28 to 47.) If not satisfied I may return it in 10 days and get money back. (Sizes 48 to 60, \$3.98.)

My Waist Measures.....My Height.....

Name

Address

If \$2.98 is enclosed with order, we pay postage guarantee. ☐ Check here.

**10 DAY
Free Trial
Coupon**

Classified Advertising

Agents

NUSILVER Silverplating and Polishing Liquid. Apply with cloth. \$1.00 bottle postpaid. NuSilver, Aurora, Illinois.

Antiques, Relics, etc.

SELL coins, paper money, stamps, relics to **ORLEANS COINS**, 814 Royal, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Business Opportunities

MAKE MONEY at home by mail. **JAMET**, Box 1436, Long Beach, California.

Detective Training

DETECTIVES—Make Secret Investigations. Experience unnecessary. Particulars **FREE**. **WAGONER**, R-125 West 26th, N. Y.

DETECTIVE TRAINING. Phillips Secret Service, 1917-D North Kenneth, Chicago, Illinois.

Educational

CORRESPONDENCE COURSES and self-instruction books, slightly used. Sold. Rented. Exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Complete details and 84-page illustrated bargain catalog **FREE**. Write **Nelson Company**, Dept. 218, Chicago.

PIANISTS: Quickly improve playing, technic, sight-reading, accuracy, memorizing through **Mental-Muscular Co-ordination**. **FREE** Booklet. **Broadwell Studios**, Dept. 184-E, Covina, California.

LEARN to Analyze Handwriting for profit. Lesson **FREE**. **A.I.G.A.**, Joplin, Missouri.

For Inventors

PATENTS SECURED. Low cost. Book and advice **free**. **L. F. Randolph**, Dept. 573, Washington, D. C.

Nurses Training School

MAKE UP TO \$25-\$35 WEEK as a trained practical nurse! Learn quickly at home. Booklet **Free**. **Chicago School of Nursing**, Dept. D-4, Chicago.

Old Money Wanted

WILL PAY \$10.00 EACH FOR CERTAIN LINCOLN PENNIES! Indianheads \$50.00; Dimes \$1,000.00. Catalogue 10c. **Federal Coin Exchange**, 4-FF, Columbus, Ohio.

WE purchase all Indianhead pennies. Complete catalogue 10c. **Waltman**, 398 Broadway, New York.

Patent Attorneys

INVENTORS—Protect your idea. Secure "Patent Guide"—**Free**. Write **CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON**, 426-E Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

Photo Finishing

ROLLS DEVELOPED—25c Coin. One Day Service. 8 Gloss Deckle Edge Prints. **CLUB PHOTO SERVICE**, Dept. 16, La Crosse, Wis.

Poems—Songwriters

SONGWRITERS: Melodies supplied without charge by recognized Hollywood composers. Lead sheets and records furnished. **Cinema Song Company**, Box 670A-6, Beverly Hills, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Send poem for immediate Examination and **FREE** Rhyming Dictionary. **RICHARD BROTHERS**, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

SONGWRITERS: PROTECT YOUR IDEAS! Hold Your Poems. Write: **SONG SERVICE**, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York.

WE NEED POEMS—Immediate consideration. Unusual Opportunity. **MASTER MELODY MAKERS**, Box 425, Hollywood, California.

POEMS WANTED FOR MUSICAL SETTING. Five Star Music Masters, 620 Beacon Building, Boston.

Salesmen Wanted

SOMEWHERE THERE IS A MAN OR WOMAN who should add \$10 to \$15 a week to their present income. That person may be you. Nearby **Rawleigh Routes** available, full or part time. Write at once. **Rawleigh Co.**, Dept. E-186-FBL, Freeport, Ill.

After an interminable time, Chris sat up protestingly. A river of liquid fire was running down his throat. He choked, gagged, and sputtered.

"Get some more of that down him. He's coming to!" a voice urged.

Chris freed himself from the bottle neck thrust at him.

"Coming to—I'm exploding!" he protested. And he caught his breath.

The sound came out full and loud, beautiful, rounded tones which made the stars dance in the sky. His voice! He grabbed the bottle which had accomplished this restoration and swigged it down with tremendous gulps.

"Holy Mother!" somebody whispered in awe as he tossed the empty aside. Chris opened his eyes. He was on the porch of the Valley Inn. A bespectacled doc was fussing with his torn hide. Ruthie Higby was holding a light for the doc and there were tear-streaks on her cheeks. Tim was standing beside him, facing a crowd gathered in the street between the burning Old Home and the hotel.

"And this nobleman—this selfless benefactor of humanity—this supremely modest stranger in our midst—has done what we have all long lacked the courage to do. He has exterminated the vermin which plagued us!" Higby was saying.

Higby might be able, Chris thought, to write a presentable editorial, but his speech-making was terrible. He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"We have seen a miracle wrought in blood and fire by a plain and humble man in the name of his fellow beings, without thought of reward—"

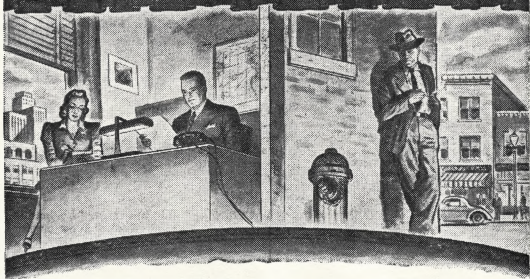
Higby sailed on. Chris grinned comfortably to himself and looked pleadingly at the doc. The medico straightened.

"Take him upstairs. I'll finish there. Three holes couldn't have done less damage if a surgeon had planted them!"

Chris felt himself lifted. Higby's voice receded as he was carried through the door. Chris was impatient. He craved the privacy of his room. When the doc had finished, he could count the bills in his pocket and contemplate a time of leisure beyond that required for the healing of these trifling wounds.

"Without thought of reward—" Chris

Where will YOU be when the curtain goes up on tomorrow?



• Tomorrow's stage is being set for new developments, new industries, new opportunities. What will be *your* role in this post-war production? Will you be one of the successes—or one of those left on the street corner?

In new industries—plastics, electronics, Diesel engines, air conditioning, light metals—and the expanding older ones, the leading roles will go to the men who are *training* for them *now*.

Many are studying with the famous International Correspondence Schools. Authoritative, practical I. C. S. Courses are written by successful men for the ambitious "comers" due to succeed them.

I. C. S. has trained thousands of leaders in American industry and business.

Its 52 years of experience in vocational education, its 26 Schools, its more than 400 courses are at your disposal.

Pick your place on tomorrow's stage and mark the coupon accordingly. *This is the day to act.*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

Scranton 9, Penna.



**TURN PAGE
FOR COUPON**

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

Air Conditioning Schools

Air Conditioning
Heating
Plumbing
Refrigeration
Steam Fitting

Chemistry Schools

Chemical Engineering
Chemistry, Analytical
Chemistry,
Industrial
Chemistry, Mfg.
Iron and Steel
Plastics
Pulp and Paper
Making

Civil, Architectural and Structural En- gineering Schools

Architecture
Architectural
Drawing
Bridge and
Building Foreman
Bridge Engineering
Building Estimating
Civil Engineering
Contracting and
Building
Highway Engineering
Lumber Dealer
Sanitary Engineering
Structural Drafting
Structural
Engineering
Surveying and
Mapping

Electrical Schools

Electrical Drafting
Electrical Engineering
Electric Utilites
Electronics
Power House
Electrician
Practical Electrician
Practical Telephony
Radio, General
Radio Operating
Radio Servicing
Telegraph Engineering

Internal Combustion Engines Schools

Aircraft and
Engine Mechanic
Automobile
Technician
Aviation
Diesel—Electric
Diesel Engine
Gas Engines

Mechanical Schools

Aeronautical
Engineer's, Junior
Airplane Drafting
Coal Mining
Flight Engineer's
Foundry Work
Heat Treatment
of Metals
Industrial
Engineering
Inventing and
Patenting
Machine Shop
Practice
Mechanical Drafting
Mechanical
Engineering

Mid-Left Work
Navigation
Patternmaking
Reading Shop
Blueprints

Sheet Metal Drafting
Sheet Metal Worker
Ship Drafting
Shipbuilding
Shop Practice
Steel Mill Workers
Tool Designing
Weather Observing
Welding
Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses

Air Brake
Car Inspector
Locomotive Engineer
Locomotive Fireman
Railroad Rate Clerk
Railroad Section
Foreman

Steam Engineering Schools

Boilermaking
Combustion
Engineering
Engine Running
Marine Engines
Petroleum
Refining Plant
Steam Electric
Steam Engines

Textile Schools

Cotton Mfg.
Rayon Weaving
Textile Designing
Woolen Mfg.

BUSINESS AND ACADEMIC COURSES

Academic Schools

Arithmetic
College Preparatory
Commercial
High School
First Year College
High School
Higher Mathematics
Illustrating

Business Schools

Accounting
Advertising

Bookkeeping
Business
Correspondence
Business
Management
Certified Public
Accounting
Commercial
Cost Accounting
Federal Tax Course
Foremanship
Motor Traffic
Management
Salesmanship

Secretarial
Stenography
Traffic Management

Civil Service Schools

City Letter Carrier
Post Office Clerk
Railway Postal Clerk

Language Schools

French
Good English
Spanish

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS BOX 3275-P, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Please send me complete information on the following
subject:

(Write above Technical, Business or General Educational
Subject in which you are interested.)

Name.....Age.....

Home Address.....

City.....State.....

Present.....Working.....

Position.....Hours.....

Special Tuition Rates for Members of the Armed Forces

repeated Higby's words. "What a man does not eat will not sicken him; what he does not think will not vex him; what he does not know will not harm him—" he added, unaware he spoke aloud.

The medico bent close, puzzled.

"What's that?" he asked uneasily.

"Philosophy," Chris answered, and winked roundly at the ceiling.

THE END

TOWN OF SUDDEN DEATH

(Continued from page 78)

Spider. He ran an expert hand over him and then turned him on his back. He lifted a puzzled face. "You'd better get him locked up while he's still unconscious—there's nothing wrong with him that I can see."

Men took Spider's weapons and carried him up the street to the jail. Doctor Crossley came over to where Miles was sitting with Julia standing beside him, white faced.

"What did you load that cannon with?" he asked as he cut away Miles' shirt.

"Powder," Julia answered. "I poured in a lot and then rammed paper in on top of it—wasn't that right?"

"Seeing as you were only five feet from Spider when you shot," the doctor said, "it worked. The only thing you forgot was the bullet."

He bared the wound high up on Miles' shoulder. "No trouble here," he said with satisfaction. "It went straight through without touching a bone." He put a pad over each side and bound it in place. "That will do until I get you to my office."

"You might take a look at this," Miles said and pulled the glove from his hand.

Crossley examined it and his lips puckered. "That's no bullet wound—what made it?"

Miles considered a moment. "You might call it," he replied gravely, "the sword of redemption." He looked down at the still form of Moss Alloway. "If it hadn't been for that I mighta been lyin' in the dirt some day—just like that."

Doctor Crossley still wore a puzzled air and Miles looked at Julia. From the look of dawning hope in her eyes he knew that she understood.

Among men who live
in work clothes all day long,
this label



TOPS 'EM ALL!

*There's a Lee
for every job!*

JELT DENIM OVERALLS
UNION-ALLS
MATCHED SHIRTS AND PANTS
WHIPCORDS • DUNGAREES
COWBOY PANTS
INDUSTRIAL UNIFORMS

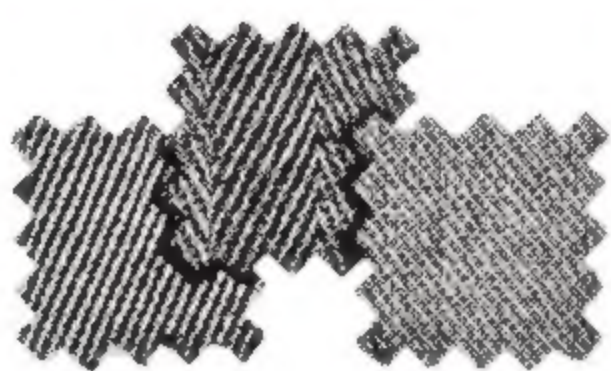


ONLY A LEE GIVES YOU THESE FINER FEATURES



**PERFECT FIT
FOR EVERY BUILD!**

Whether you are short, tall, slim or stout, Lee "Tailored Sizes" mean a perfect fit every time.



**HANDSOME CUSTOM-
MADE FABRICS!**

Your choice of smart looking colors in double-tough fabrics custom-made exclusively for Lee.



**LEE'S FAMOUS
GUARANTEE!**

Your money back or a new garment free if your LEE doesn't fit better and wear longer than any work garment you've ever worn.

COPYRIGHT 1944, THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.
*World's Largest Manufacturers of Union-
Made Work Clothes and Industrial Uniforms*
Kansas City, Mo. • Minneapolis, Minn.
Trenton, N. J. • San Francisco, Calif.
South Bend, Ind. • Salina, Kans.

THE LARGEST SELLING LINE OF ITS KIND IN AMERICA!

"Gossip is dangerous at this stage!"—says HI to HATT

Remember-war has reached a stage
where guys must talk discreet

There's traitors set to act upon
each rumor we repeat!

Chas. Meyers



DON'T GIVE THE AXIS A LEAD!

We gotta mind our P's an' Q's
to beat the foes we're fightin'—
Don't hand 'em any secret news,
in 'speakin' or in writin'...
They're sittin' in the audience,
with ears as big as platters,
So let's all act with common sense,
an' shush on wartime matters!

(Signed) MR. HI and MR. HATT

KESSLER'S
BLENDED WHISKEY